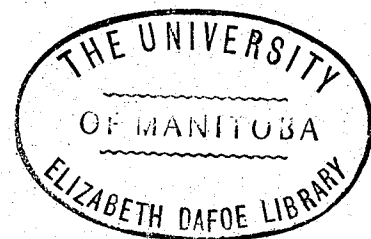


EMERGENCE OF NEW CASTES IN INDIA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
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I also wish to acknowledge the debt I personally owe to the people of India. It has been through intimate contact with them that I have come to appreciate the fact that cultures are dynamic responses to particular circumstances. A desire to understand Indian cultural responses better has led me to return to a study of anthropology.

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FIGURE I

MAP OF INDIA, SHOWING POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

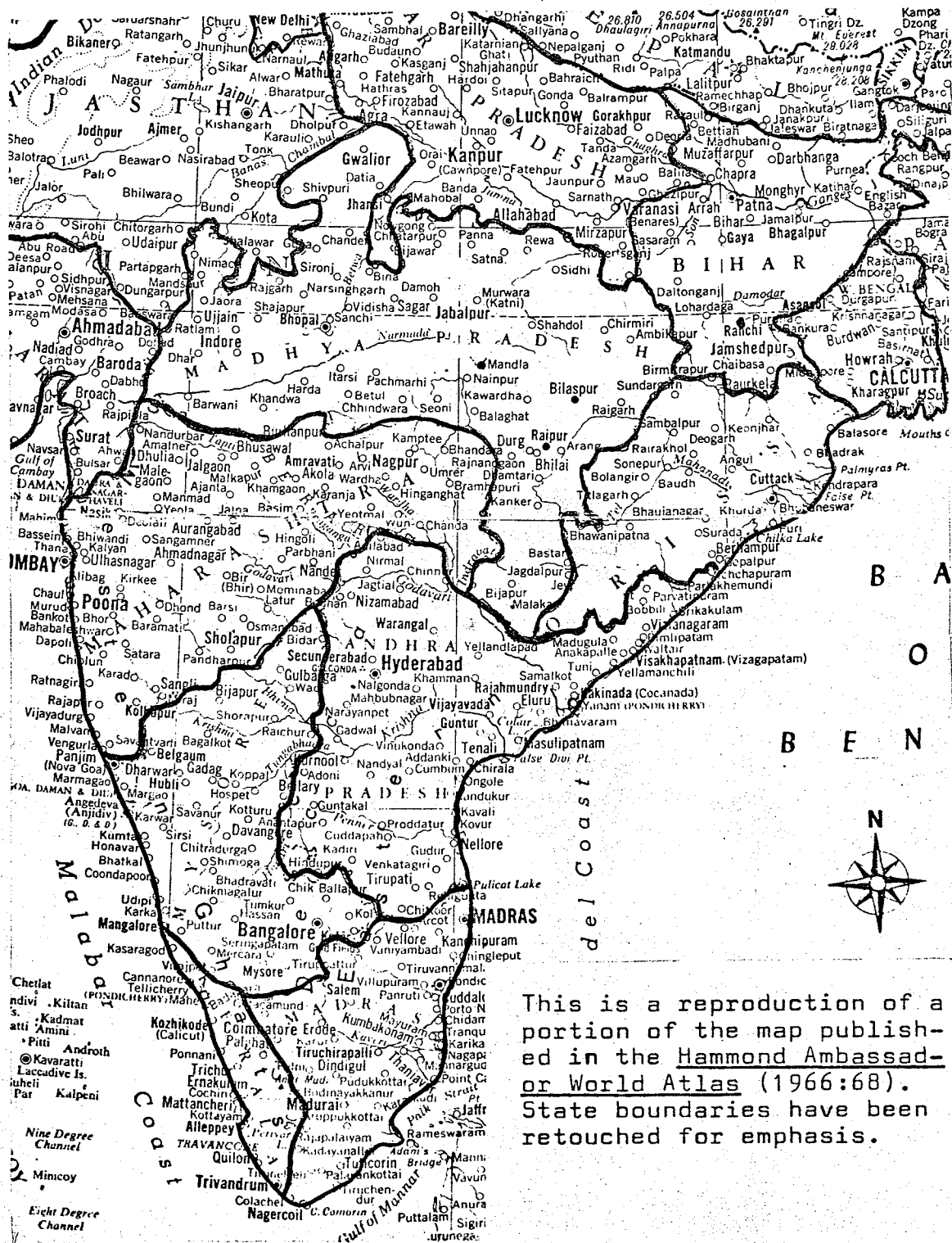
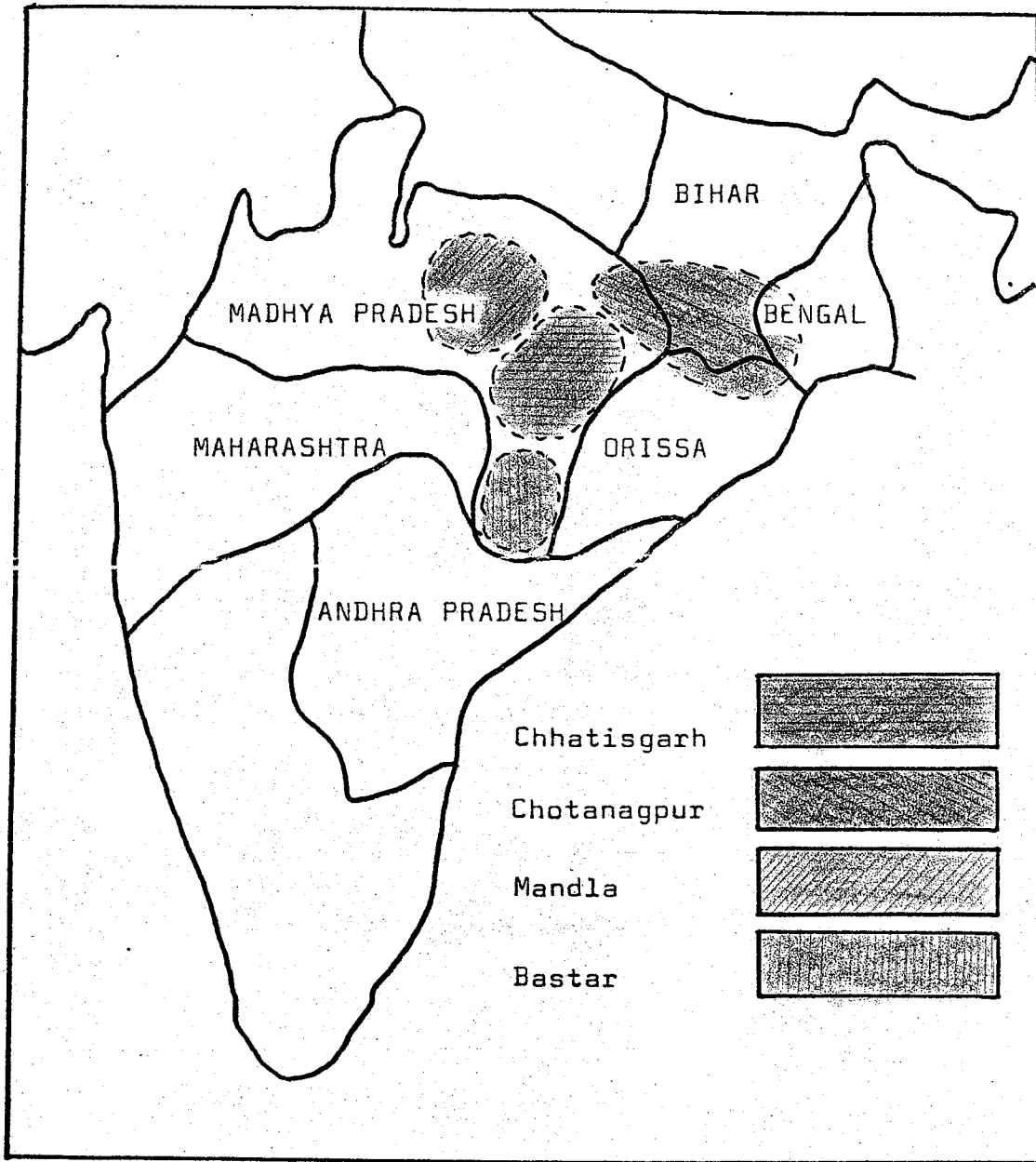


FIGURE II
 OUTLINE MAP OF INDIA, SHOWING
 EAST-CENTRAL REGION



The colored sections represent older political and sub-cultural areas. These area names are freely used by both local residents and by authors writing about the region or its people. Boundaries are not precise.

CHAPTER I

NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The Problem

The Indian caste system has intrigued students of society for many years, since it represents one of the most highly elaborated systems of social stratification in the world. A large volume of literature already exists on this subject, but two considerations led me to undertake the present study: a) no one, to my knowledge, has yet attempted to document the conditions which prevail at the time when new groups emerge as recognized castes; and b) there is not yet a consensus of opinion as to the dynamics of caste, hence further study is warranted.

A brief survey of some of the literature will indicate the many contradictory views scholars have held. Early writers like John Nesfield (1885) and H. Risley (1915) were primarily concerned with history and race. They tried to link the caste system to specific historical events like the Aryan invasions of 1500 - 500 B.C. They assumed that the fair-skinned invaders were better fighters who subjugated the darker-skinned original inhabitants. Some inter-

marriages were assumed to have taken place as the warrior men took local women. The result was that within a few generations skin color ranged from fair to dark, depending upon the degree of Aryan or Dravidian blood. After the initial period of intermarrying, the fairer-skinned classes began to insist upon endogamy to protect their social privileges. Thus the insistence upon endogamy assured the superiority of the Aryans in perpetuity. The early division of society based upon skin color is deemed to have been the 4-fold Varna division. Subsequent fissioning of society due to accidents like quarrels, migrations, etc., has caused the number of castes to increase greatly, so that today there are over 3,000 named groups and many more endogamous units.

Blunt (1931) took issue with this racial origin theory, claiming that it was fabricated upon pure speculation. He looked for the origin of caste at a much later date - probably about the 7th century A.D. He suggested that caste is really based upon specialization of labor. Specialists in any occupation would tend to marry mates from their own trade guilds in order to maintain a monopoly on the skills and knowledge which they possessed. Guild endogamy developed into caste endogamy.

Cox (1959) argued that the emphasis upon purity/

pollution as the basis for caste ranking is evidence for the theory that caste developed out of a struggle for power between the Kshatriyas (soldier-rulers) and the Brahmans (priests). He did not explain why the struggle for supremacy between rulers and priests in other parts of the world, like medieval Europe, failed to produce a caste system.

Francis Hsu (1963) saw wide differences between Chinese and Hindu society, in spite of similar size and subsistence base. He despaired of finding any sociological or economic explanation for the differences between these two societies, so he opted for an explanation based on ideology. He thought that the Chinese have had a "this-worldly" view, and have paid but scant attention to things religious. What religion there was in China, was really an extension of kinship in that they worshipped ancestors. Hindus, according to Hsu, have held an "other-worldly" view. They have been obsessed with religion, and this has produced a tendency to fissioning because it places religious obligations ahead of social obligations. Fissioning in turn has produced the caste system with its extreme emphasis upon social distance between segments of society.

Leach (1960) believed that the caste system is based upon consensus: each caste gladly accepts its position within the hierarchy. Berreman on the other hand emphasized conflict as being inherent in any stratified

society. He held that castes are not characterized by consensus "but by conformity. They are maintained not by agreement but by sanctions." (in Reuck, 1957:47).

Karve (1959) argued that the castes of India are culturally dissimilar, hence Hindu society is an "agglomeration" of dissimilar groups which were forced to enter into economic relationships with each other in order to survive physically. They retain their old cultural identity to the extent that they retain their own traditional traits. They retain a sense of social identity by insisting on endogamy. Fox (1969) disagreed sharply with Karve, saying that the castes and tribes which display unique cultural traits have developed these traits after leaving main-line Hindu culture to occupy a vacant ecological niche.

Another point of conflict in the literature on the Indian caste system is the argument over whether or not it is unique. Those who argue that it is unique focus their attention on cultural content rather than structure-function. Thus Hsu talks about Hindu religious "Weltanschauung". Other scholars like Grans and Berreman insist that one must first of all focus on those things which permit comparison with other social systems. They believe that an understanding of similarities is a prerequisite to understanding differences. I agree with this point of view

so will focus on social-political-economic factors which I believe cause new castes to emerge, rather than on Hindu theology or philosophy.

Scope of this Study

In this study I do not intend to search for particular historical events that might be interpreted as being associated with the origins of the caste system. Nor do I intend to examine under a microscope, as it were, a caste system in microcosm as has been so ably done in the intense village studies by men like Bailey (1957), Lewis (1958), Mayer (1960), and Berreman (1963), et al.

My intention is to study the processes by which new castes emerge. New castes have been emerging out of tribal and out of Outcaste groups. Together, these categories comprise 100,000,000 people or 1/5 of India's total population. Space and purpose forbid a comprehensive discussion of this enormous segment of India's population, but I believe the examples selected provide reasonable support for the conclusions reached.

In speaking about tribal peoples, I have deliberately excluded the whole of Assam which contains a large tribal population. Other tribals living in north-west India, in eastern and in extreme southern India have also been omitted for the sake of brevity. I have concentrated on those

living in southern Bihar, north-western Madhya Pradesh, western Orissa, the southern tip of Madhya Pradesh, and the surrounding area of northern Andhra Pradesh. These tribes live in a huge crescent around the northern, eastern, and southern sides of the Chhatisgarh region of eastern Madhya Pradesh.

While I cannot present a detailed diachronic account of any one tribe or caste undergoing transformation, the events alluded to in this paper will cover roughly one century of time from mid 1800s to mid 1900s. By looking at the changes which have occurred during this century, I hope to be able to show the direction that culture change is taking in India.

This study is based upon library research, plus material gathered from a questionnaire which was administered in a particular community in India. The questionnaire was designed to gather information which will test the conclusions reached referent to the effects of conversion to Christianity of an Outcaste group. I have also included some personal observations made during the time I lived in the Chhatisgarh region as hospital administrator from 1962 to 1968.

Definitions

Caste

The word "caste" was first applied to the units of Indian society by the Portugese. It derives from the Portugese word "casta" meaning simply a human group. Most European languages ever since have used the word "caste". The most commonly used word in the Sanskritic languages of India is "jat" or "jati". This word has a more general usage than its English equivalent. It means species or breed, and is used for humans, animals or plants. A wild "jat" of orange tree will produce sour fruit. A good "jat" of cow will produce more milk than a mediocre "jat".

At the human societal level, "jat" is used for:

- a) the territorially limited, endogamous group, and
- b) the larger aggregate of groups bearing a common name.

Thus any Brahman is said to belong to the Brahman jat, but the endogamous unit to which he belongs is a particular sort of Brahman. Some jats are found all over India, others in only one locality (these are commonly called "local jats"). In order to distinguish these two levels, most writers on the subject resort to the caste vs. subcaste distinction. For these writers, caste refers to the wider grouping, and subcaste to the territorially limited endogamous unit.

Using "subcaste" to designate the endogamous unit appears very unsatisfactory to me, because of the implications of that word. It implies that the smaller unit has separated or broken away from the larger original whole. It assumes that every jat having a common name is descended from one parent stem and that they are all biologically related. These assumptions must be questioned. A further difficulty inherent in using "subcaste" to designate the endogamous unit lies in the fact that it leads to awkward and confusing usage in the literature on caste. An example of this is Cox who says that he will use "subcaste" for the endogamous unit, but for convenience sake "when we speak of 'the caste' we shall be referring to the subcaste" (Cox 1959:28). In other words, he has proposed a definition with which he cannot live comfortably, so he intentionally uses the word imprecisely.

I am more impressed with the solution to this problem proposed by Irawati Karve in her 1959 Berkley, California, anthropology colloquium address. She proposes using "caste" for the endogamous unit, and "caste complex" or "caste cluster" for the larger grouping bearing a common name. I think that she is on the right track, but would suggest an even more specific word for the larger grouping, namely "caste-type". I make this suggestion because the caste-type is in reality a social slot, not

just an an accidental or fortuitous choosing of the same name; and because I do not believe that all Brahmans (or other caste-types) are biologically related.

In this paper "caste" will refer to endogamous units. Larger than the caste is the "caste-type" within which there is no social organization, but rather a common name and a shared or similar social status in separated localities. Smaller than the caste is the "gotra" or clan, which is normally exogamous. These smaller units are outside the concern of this paper, since I am interested only in inter-caste relationships.

Having specified the unit of study, I shall now operationalize a definition of caste in terms of its essential features:

(1) The first is birth-ascribed membership. All children born of the union of two members of a caste are automatically members of that caste. Birth-ascribed membership is made simple and clear-cut by insistence on endogamy. Even casual sexual contact between castes is considered to be in very bad form. Choosing to marry someone from another caste will lead to ostracism by both castes at worst, and by the higher caste at best. Marrying someone from another caste but within the same caste-type may be tolerated, but is seldom done due to geographical distance.

(2) The second is caste specialization of labor. One

must be careful at this point, for not all occupations are restricted to one caste, nor do all castes practice their traditional occupation. Any member of a low caste may be a farm laborer. There are Fishermen who do not fish, and Potters who do not make pots. Tasks which are regarded to be polluting will not be done by anyone who considers himself to be above the particular task in the ritual hierarchy. No one but a Chamar will skin a dead animal and remove the carcass. No one but a Sweeper will clean up feces or filth.

Operationally, however, I consider specialization of labor on the basis of caste an essential feature since one is not free to follow any profession he chooses. Traditional occupations are filled by members of requisite castes. All of the castes within a village live in well established ritual and economic relationships with each other. A person born in a village have very little choice as to occupation; either he follows his particular caste vocation, or he may become a farm laborer or other menial worker.

(3) The third is stratification. Caste members do not conceptualize their standing vis-a-vis other castes as being horizontal. Each one is ranked either above or below the others. There may not be agreement as to who occupies the higher position, but social distance is conceptualized as being vertical. Social distance is

perceived to be based upon intrinsic worth. Those born into a caste having great worth are thought to be ritually pure. Those born in a low caste have little intrinsic worth and are thought to be polluted. Purity/pollution are inherent qualities which determine privileges and duties in society.

These three features which I have called essential are features which a person within the system would accept, and may thus be termed "emic" features.

Tribe

The word "tribe" is used in India to designate those segments of the Indian nation, numbering roughly 30,000,000 people, which are not yet fully integrated into the dominant Hindu society in terms of economic or social relationships, are not fully Hindu in religion, and still practice or can remember practicing hunting-gathering and hoe horticulture. Tribals live in villages or hamlets separate from multi-caste villages. They are found primarily on the plateau of India, in the dense forests, or on the steep hillsides and mountains. They are usually referred to as Adivasi or Adi Dravida, meaning the original inhabitants of the land.

The words "caste" and "tribe" are not always used exclusively. Stephen Fuchs uses "tribe" to describe the