



## Recasting Caste: From the Sacred to the Profane

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## Book Reviews

### **Recasting Caste: From the Sacred to the Profane**

HIRA SINGH

New Delhi, Sage, 2014

Hira Singh's *Recasting Caste* presents the most sophisticated Marxist anthropology of caste in India to date. Singh's thesis is strikingly simple: caste, far from embodying a cultural or religious principle of hierarchy, ought to be understood as the social relations of production in the Indian subcontinent. The social relations of production, as we know from Marx's *The German Ideology*, are linked dialectically to the mode of production. In other words, political-economic and sociocultural aspects of a given context are tied inextricably to each other, and, as the author shows with examples from his own fieldwork, we can study these interconnected aspects as empirical rather than metaphysical realities. Empirically, caste relations vary across time and space, preventing us from generalising from ancient Vedic texts to the present or from a particular fieldsite to the entire subcontinent. Deftly combining personal experiences and fieldwork data in rural north India with evidence from social historians of ancient and medieval South Asia, *Recasting Caste* is both ambitious and compelling.

Hira Singh's contribution ought to be situated within a wave of contemporary scholarship that seeks to rethink the anthropology of caste in India. The erstwhile post-war anthropology of India came to be dominated by structural-functionalist and neo-Orientalist theories of caste. Both emphasised a harmonious, consensual view of caste relations, which they saw in terms of social interdependence and cultural holism respectively. Both followed a dominant strand of colonial anthropology in treating caste as a distinctively Hindu phenomenon. Accordingly, a curious exceptionalism characterised studies of caste for decades, neglecting questions of political economy or subordinating them to overarching cultural or religious principles of hierarchy. Methodologically, ethnographic evidence came to be read vis-a-vis ancient Indian religious texts, ignoring the obvious differences in the socio-economic conditions that separated the past from the present. This oddly ahistorical and apolitical anthropology of caste has been challenged over the past two decades by scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Susan Bayly, Rupa Viswanath, Nathaniel Roberts and Sumit Guha. These scholars have studied caste in terms of its underlying political economy, focusing on the state, colonialism or capitalism as key determinants shaping caste dynamics in particular contexts. *Recasting Caste* is a specifically Marxist contribution to these

contemporary scholarly debates insofar as it identifies caste as the social relations of production in South Asia, and, hence, treats property, kinship, coercion and conflict as matters of comparative political economy rather than Hindu metaphysics or Orientalist cultural essentialism.

To the extent that the author challenges our received notions of hierarchy, his findings and arguments will interest not only anthropologists of South Asia but anyone who studies social identities. Since the 1980s, the field of post-colonial studies has decisively shaped our understanding of the cultural politics of identity. In particular, Subaltern Studies, a subset of this field, has influenced a range of disciplines from history to comparative literature to anthropology. Hira Singh shows, however, that their notion of caste identity as inherently cultural and religious ought to be understood as an anti-Marxist formulation by ex-Marxists seeking to carve out a space in the American academy. Such a formulation, regardless of the political openings it created for South Asian academics from dominant caste backgrounds, brushed aside vital questions of agrarian property relations and colonial political economy. As a consequence, the likes of Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee ended up, wittingly or not, reproducing Orientalist tropes about superstitious peasants trapped in the Hindu caste order. Even the symbols of subaltern resistance turned out, on this reading of South Asian history, to reinforce the cultural and religious idioms by which dominant groups legitimised their rule. Schisms that appeared in sociocultural wholes were neatly resolved within them. Subaltern identity got reduced to consciousness, mental attributes connected to sociocultural formations, rather than being understood in terms of their underlying political economy. Yet, as we learn from the author's research on Indians in South Africa and the Caribbean, the political economy of colonial indenture flattened older caste hierarchies between the middle and lower caste groups who sailed overseas to work in faraway plantations. As socio-economic realities changed, caste identities dissipated even as a neo-Hindu *comunitas* came to be conjured up in conditions of racial discrimination and injustice. *Recasting Caste* concludes, therefore, that political-economic and cultural-religious aspects of human existence are inseparable, and purely culturalist understandings of society are deeply flawed.

Hira Singh states at the beginning of the book that he would like to initiate a dialogue on rethinking caste. In this spirit, it would be fair to raise some critical questions here. Does a Marxist anthropology of caste necessarily imply determination by the economic base in the final instance? Or might it be possible for us to take seriously instances in which socio-economic outcomes are shaped by the workings of state power, patriarchal relations or ideas about how society should be ordered? If we are to avoid a one-sided dialectic between the material and the sociocultural dimensions of everyday life, we ought to contemplate a fuller dialectic between these oft-opposed dimensions that is driven by reciprocal causation. In bringing Marx into conversation with Weber rather than viewing them, according to the dictates of post-war American social science, as ideological opponents, we can thus work towards richer conceptions

of the interrelationship between the economic, cultural, intellectual and political aspects of our existence.

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### **Puer Tea: Ancient Caravans and Urban Chic**

JINGHONG ZHANG

Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2014

Jinghong Zhang's excellent monograph, as its title tells us, is about Puer tea. The subtitle, however—'Ancient Caravans and Urban Chic'—is oddly misleading, since the study has almost nothing to say about caravans or urban chic. Rather, her protagonists are contemporary tea farmers, connoisseurs, speculators, regulators and the like. Between them, these agents have in recent years shaped what Zhang, borrowing from Appadurai, calls the 'cultural biography' of Puer tea.

Puer tea is a distinctive type of tea, traditionally produced in Yunnan province in southwest China and transported (by, yes, ancient caravans) throughout and beyond China. Despite its ancient lineage, the defining characteristics of Puer tea remain a matter of contention. Three, however, are commonly accepted: firstly, Puer tea is made from the large-leaf *Camellia sinensis assamica* that is common in Yunnan but less so in other tea-growing areas of China, where the small-leaf *Camellia sinensis sinensis* predominates. Secondly, Puer tea is created by a unique process of oxidation and fermentation. As with green tea—but in contrast to other kinds of tea—leaves picked for Puer tea initially undergo little or no oxidation before being roasted, rolled, further dried and compressed into cakes. Unlike all other teas, however, Puer tea undergoes a further process, sometimes called 'post-fermentation', by one of two methods. The first is natural ageing. The tea is stored, as wine is stored, in the expectation that over time it will develop a rich, mellow flavour very different from the astringent taste of raw Puer tea. The second method is an artificial ripening process that was invented in Yunnan in 1973, and involves storing the tea for several months in an enclosed, controlled environment. Puer tea can thus enter the market in three forms: as raw Puer, known as *sheng cha*, for immediate consumption or for storage and ageing; as naturally aged raw Puer tea (*lao sheng cha*); or as artificially ripened Puer tea (*shu cha*).

The third characteristic follows from the second: Puer tea, unlike other kinds of tea, is believed to improve with age. It is this aspect of Puer tea that lies at the heart of the events that Zhang describes. As Zhang, who grew up in Kunming (capital of Yunnan) recalls from her own childhood, until the closing years of the twentieth century, most tea-drinkers in Yunnan did not set any value by the aged product. The locally