Chapter I
The Origin of Caste System

Of the many cultures that flourished in India the literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture are not only the earliest but contain the first mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up caste. The only other culture whose records are intelligible is the Dravidian; but when that culture put forward its documents that are extant, it had already been immensely influenced by the Indo-Aryan traditions. The Brahananic variety of this Indo-Aryan civilisation – it is the most widely and deeply spread aspect, was developed in the Gangetic plain. It is, therefore, an established fact that some of the important aspects of caste originated in this region. The people, who are known here and elsewhere as Indo-Aryans and whose earliest literary records have furnished the institution of caste and class, belong linguistically to the larger family of peoples designated either as Indo-Europeans or as Indo-Germans. They comprised the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons and Tautens, the Romans and the Iranians among others. The Spanish and the Portuguese too belong to the same family. In Pre-historic times about 5000 B.C the ancestors of all these people seem to have occupied one fairly defined region and to have been in close cultural contact with one another. When for some reasons they dispersed from their centre of characterisation, various groups started in different directions and had varying adventures. One of the branches of these people which reached India about 2500 BC with the kind of religion represented in the early Vedic religion is called the Indo-Aryans.

It is seen that the favourite word for certain groups and other of people among
these Indo-Aryan was ‘Varna’, ‘Colour’. Thus they spoke of the ‘Dasa Varna’, ‘Dasa colour’ or more properly Dasa people. Iranian literature, though in bulk very much later than the Vedas, has preserved the significant information that the Iranians spoke of the peoples whom they found in occupation of certain areas which later they captured, as ‘Daha’. Iranian Daha is the exact equivalent of Vedic ‘Dasa’, making allowance for the linguistic values of the sounds of last syllable. Like the Vedic Aryans they spoke of themselves as Arya or ‘Ariya’ whose identity with the Sanskrit word ‘Arya’ need not be pointed out. The ‘Daha’ are the predatory tribes of Turan, where before their bifurcation and further dispersal the ancestors of the Vedic Indians and Iranians lived together as one community designating themselves by the term Arya. Though ‘Daha’ means enemies or robbers, their nationality is believed to be Iranian. The Vedic Indians might well have applied the terms to their enemies in India, the native population of the Punjab. The Vedic Aryan also developed the exclusive spirit in social behaviour toward native population and also had cultivated a partiality for ideas of ceremonial purity. Some of them in their separate development actually elaborated them into exclusive social stratification, though of rather limited extent and depth. This behaviour of Vedic Aryan (who were a branch of Indo-European people) is analogues and comparable for sake of clarity and an example with the European conquerors and settlers from the 16th century onwards. For these modern representatives of the early Indo-Europeans, of the Latins, of the Celts and of the Tautens or Anglo-Saxons, had by that time been imbibing the liberalising tenets of Christianity for about eight to ten centuries, asking them to treat men as brothers and exhorting them to cast off pride and exclusiveness. In spite of the equalitarian and democratic preaching of centuries,
wherever the Europeans went as conquerors they manifested exclusiveness varying from utter contempt and strictest barrier to condescension and hypergamous feeling and practice. Whenever they condescended they at the most took the native women as their wives but never even connived at their own women marrying the native males. Even in this hypergamous practice they took care to separate the progeny of half-breeds.

The behaviour of exclusive pride toward conquered peoples of whatever cultural status or racial class met within the doings of so many Indo-European peoples, whether under the continuance of their tribal religions or even under the acceptance of Christianity, appears in the attitudes and practices of the Aryans of the Gangetic plains of the Vedic or post-Vedic age in a particular context. Their conquered were a dark people. When they entered India they must have among them at least three well-defined classes, inter marriage between whom must have been rather rare, though not positively forbidden. Their first regulation in this line began with the task of excluding the Shudras, which class must have been largely formed by the aborigines, from their religious worship. The Shudras represented as the lowest class in society. Very early in their Indian history the Aryans enjoined that the Shudras shall not practise the religious worship developed by them. They even forbade their presence in sacrificial hall. The three first castes were first enjoined not to marry a Shudra female before any other restriction of an endogamous nature was tried to be promulgated. A Shudra male trying to marry a Brahmin female was the greatest sacrilege that could be perpetrated against society. The various factors that characterise caste-society were the result, in the first instance of the attempts on the part of the upholders of the Brahmanic
civilisation to exclude the aborigines and the Shudras from religions and social communion with themselves. That the Shudra class was largely formed by those aborigines who had accepted the over-lordship of the Indo-Aryans and had entered into their service is more than probable. In the earliest literature only the first three classes – the Brahmin, the kashatriya, and the Vaishya – are postulated and that is only in one place, which is regarded by most Vedic scholars to be chronologically one of the latest, that the Shudra class is mentioned as one of the four. It has not been found possible yet to give a satisfactory derivation of the word Shudra in terms of Sanskritic roots. Further, when the fourth class is definitely formulated, the Brahmanic literature contemplates it as in contradiction to the other three classes. Thus the Vedic opposition between the Aryan and the Dasa is replaced by the Brahmanic classification of ‘dvijati’ and the ‘ekjati’ (the Shudra) suggesting the transmutation of the Dasa into Shudra in the minds of the writers of the Brahmanic and later periods.

That the main ingredient of caste system, viz. the regulation of endogamy or rather its earlier form, permitted hypergamy, was the result of the desire on the part of the Aryan of the Gangetic plain to preserve their physical purity and cultural integrity, is a proposition which finds unequivocal support in the distribution of physical types in Northern India. It is very instructive and even necessary to bear in mind that even as late as 150 BC when Patanjali the great grammarian wrote, “the physical characteristics of a Brahmin were fair skin and tawny hair”, Patanjali declares them to be the intrinsic traits making a Brahmin, and black colour of the skin that of a non-Brahmin. The various anthropometric survey of 1931 census of India conducted in

1 Patanjali, Vyakarna-Mahabhashya, Translated by Charudev Shastri (Delhi:Motilal Banarasi Das), 1867, Sutra II 2,6.
Gujarat and also similar surveys in the Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Western India have shown that in a linguistic region the castes are physically more related to one another than to similar castes outside the region. Outside Uttar Pradesh there appear to be some castes rather low in social scale which are physically more akin to the highest caste than are the middle ones. The origin of endogamy in the earlier form of hypergamy may be placed in the Gangetic plain and attributed to the Brahmanic culture whose literature provides the earliest word picture of such a state of things. The idea of endogamy and other elements of castes were taken by the Brahmin prospectors with them. Hence in the other regions as much correspondence between physical type and social status is not met with. The prospectors could disturb the physical mixture of the region where they went. They could only try to apply their scheme of occupational segregation and endogamy to various groups according to their respective abilities. It may, therefore, be concluded that caste in India is a child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of the Ganges and the Yamuna and thence transferred to other parts of the country.

This racial origin of the principal feature of the caste system is further supported by the early term ‘Varna’ meaning colour used to specify the orders in society. Later on the word Jati is specialised to denote caste, which is a group the membership of which is acquired by birth. The word ‘Jati’ etymologically means ‘something into which one is born’. It is occasionally used by good ancient authorities as equivalent to ‘Varna’.

With functional differentiation in society there came into being separate occupational groups with more or less distinct interests. It is a known feature of
ancient and medieval society that the occupation of each group tends to become customarily hereditary among its members. Only the Brahmins reserved as their monopoly the occupation of a priest. No doubt they were in the beginning inspired by the laudable motive of preserving the all important sacred lore. But later on they looked upon their priest craft as their monopolistic activity and rigorously kept it up, while the traditional occupations of the other two castes were progressively encroached upon by other castes. There is also a natural inclination for each occupational group to be habitually endogamous. Both these tendencies became rules; the former more or less nebulous, and the latter very rigid, after the pattern of the Brahmins. Occupation thus became endogamous groups.

The attitude of respect for details that was first fostered in connection with ritual became the prevailing attitude in social behaviour. Adherence to detail of social and customary etiquette became the distinguishing mark of membership of a group. Distinction in any detail tended to be translated into separateness of membership and hence of a group.

The lack of rigid unitary control of the State, the unwillingness of the rulers to enforce a uniform standard of law and customs, their readiness to recognise the varying customs of different groups as valid, and their usual practice of allowing things somehow to adjust themselves, helped the fissiparous tendency of groups and fostered the spirit of solidarity and community feeling in every group. Both these circumstances conspired to encourage the formation of small groups based on petty distinctions. The multiplicity of the groups and the thoroughness of the whole system are due to the

habit of the Hindu mind to create categories and to carry things to their logical end, a
characteristic manifest in their literature, philosophy and religious creeds.

The word ‘caste’ is of Spanish and Portuguese origin. ‘Casta’ as it was
used in Spanish, means lineage or race. It is derived from the Latin word Castus which
means pure. The Spaniards were the first to use it, but its Indian application is from the
Portuguese who had so applied it in the middle of the fifteenth century. The current
spelling of the word is after the French word ‘Caste’, which appears in 1740 in the
‘academics’, and is hardly found before 1800. Before that time it was spelt as ‘Cast’.
In the sense of race or breed of man it was used as early as 1555 AD. The Spanish
word ‘Casta’ was applied to the mixed breed between Europeans, Indians (American)
and Negroes. But caste was not used in the Indian sense till seventeenth century.

The Indian use is the leading one now and it has influenced all other uses. As
the Indian idea of caste was but vaguely understood, this word was loosely applied to
the hereditary classes of Europe resembling the castes of India, who keep themselves
socially distinct. Darwin has applied this word to different classes of social insets. The
Portuguese used this word to denote the Indian institution as they thought such a
system was intended to keep purity of blood. We may thus see that derivation of the
word does not help us to understand what caste is.

The definition of a caste by different authors may be found in the various

---

3 Professor C.G Selgiman attributed this mental trait to the Nordic race (His Presidential address to
the Royal Anthropological Institute, J.R.A.I,1924).
4 Cox, Oliver Cromwell, Caste, Class & Race – A Study in Social Dynamics (New York:Monthly
Review Press), 1959, pp. 3-5.
5 Ibid.
6 The castes are connected together by finely graduated varieties. Darwin’s Origin of Species, ii, 36
(1836 AD) quoted in Ibid.
volumes of the report of the census of India for 1901. E. Senart in his book ‘after
reminding his readers that no statement that can be made on the subject can be
considered as absolutely true’ wrote, that the apparent relations of the facts admit of
numerous shades of distinction, and that only the most general characteristics cover the
whole of the subject, he goes on to describe a caste as ‘a close corporation in theory at
any rate rigorously hereditary, equipped with a certain traditional and independent
organisation including a chief and a council meeting on occasion in assemblies of more
or less plenary authority and going together at certain festivals; bound together by
common occupation, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to
question of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction
the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the
community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and above all, by final
irrevocable exclusion from the group’.

Though Senart has attempted to give an all
embracing definition of a caste yet some of the principal words, like ‘close
corporation’ can be questioned. Again, all castes do not have councils.

H. Risley, a renowned demographer, defines caste as “a collection of families
or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated
with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human
or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those
who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community.”

According to S.V. Ketkar, another distinguished authority on the subject, “A
caste is a social group having two characteristics; (1) membership is confined to those

8 Risley, Herbert, People of India (Delhi: Oriental Books), 1969, p.67.
who are born of members and includes all person so born; (2) the members are
forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of such
groups has a special name by which it is called several of such small aggregates are
grouped together under a common name, while these larger groups are but
subdivisions of groups still larger which have independent names."9

Seeking origin of a social system may be an unproductive type of endeavour.
The following ancient Hindu text seems to suit the occasion “the origin of seers, rivers,
great families, women and sin is not to be found out”10. With respect to the origin of
castes, the difficulty probably lies in the fact that the caste system did not Originate. A
social order does not originate; it evolves. Hence, that what might be discovered as the
origin is most likely not the social organisation which was sought to be described.
However, notwithstanding the fact, apart from the minor variations and combination
there are five important theories about the origin of caste11;

1. The traditional view of the origin of caste according to the Code of Manu-that
caste is based on the four varnas or colours. There are several passages in the oldest
Vedic literature dealing with the origin of Varnas. The oldest is the hymn in the
Purusha-Sukta Rig-Veda which says that the Brahman varna represented the mouth of
the purusha,-which may be translated as ‘the Universal Man’, referring perhaps to
mankind as a whole,-the Rajanya (i.e. Kshatriya) his arms, the Vaisya his thighs and the
Sudra his feet.12

10 Cox, Oliver Cromwell., op cit, pp. 83-84.
12 Rig Veda, Translated by H.H. Wilson (New Delhi:Cosomo Publication), 1977,x, 90,12.
brahmano 'sya mukham asid bahu rajanyah kritah /
uru tad asya yad vaisyah padbhyaam sudro ajayata //
2. That it is entirely derived from occupation, which is the theory advanced by Nesfield, who regarded the present division of Indian society into castes, which are largely occupational, as indicating the origin of the whole system.

3. The development of caste as a result of a combination of tribal origins, functional guilds and religion, which is the theory advanced by Ibbetson.

4. The family or gentile explanation by Senart. This theory is far fetched because the 'gens' correspond to gotra, which instead of being synonymous with caste, definitely runs counter to it, and

5. Risley's explanation of the origin of caste as being from colour and hypergamy. This theory fails to explain satisfactorily the taboo on food and marriage.

When the Aryan first entered India, they were already divided into three social classes, similar to those existing amongst their kinsmen in Iran (Rathaestao, Atharva and Vastrya). Of these classes, two, the ruling or military class, and the priestly class, were already recognised as superior to the 'Vish', or Aryan commonalty. At first, the names of these two classes had not been definitely fixed, but before long they became known respectively as Kshatriya and Brahman.13

The priesthood at that time was definitely a profession to which were admitted recruits from other classes; and at that time, and for many years after, the priesthood was subordinated to the ruling class. The Aryan invaders brought few women with them into India, and had to seek wives from the aboriginal inhabitants, whom they called Dasyus. These were a primitive race, in every way alien to the Aryan civilisation, religion and colour. The process of intermarriage was therefore distasteful, ceasing as

soon as enough women had been bred to supply the needs of the community, but as their branches pushed further into the country, it recommenced, until there were many groups of various degrees of mixed blood, all strongly averse to further intermarriage. Such intermarriage was certainly more frequent amongst the commonalty than the ruling class, and probably more frequent amongst the ruling than the priestly class; whose ceremonial purity would have been affected thereby. But it undoubtedly occurred amongst them also to some extent. And so arose the four famous varnas, or 'colours' – a significant name; the first three called Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, after the existing Aryan social classes, the fourth called Shudra, a term of uncertain meaning, possibly the name of some Dasyu tribe.

The progress of civilisation introduced certain important changes in the Vedic social system. It would seem, firstly, that the tendency to endogamy caused by amalgamation of the races of different blood had sensibly weakened with the passage of time; at all events, one hears of numerous instances of mixed marriage both at this and at a later period. Secondly, trade and industry became organised into a number of guilds or corporations of persons following the same occupation, which quickly became influential, and later were powerful enough to secure for themselves important privileges. They soon succeeded in establishing the principle of hereditary function, which predisposed them in favour of guild endogamy. And lastly, long before the end of this period, the Brahmanical order, whose original function had been confined to the expert knowledge and performance of religious ritual, had acquired a monopoly of all important branches of learning.

Brahmans by that time became the theologian, the philosophers, the physicians,
the lawyers and judges of the age – possibly also its artists and its engineers. Not only so, but the family priest was able to make his voice heard in the royal councils and so the Brahmans became the age’s statesmen, capable of making and unmaking dynasties. These Brahman statesmen often exercised an authority greater and more real than masters, indeed, there were times when it seemed probable that they would be able to overthrow the old aristocracy and replace it by a theocracy. But though the kshatriya might fear and even hate the Brahman, he could not do without him; and as the whole tone of Jatka folk-lore proves, the relation between them seriously embittered.

This political enmity between class and class was reinforced by a religious enmity. The emergence of Buddhism, a religion founded by Kshatriya prince was an other important event of the period. As this new religion was adopted by the Kshatriya nobility and so became a state religion and though the Brahmans never entirely lost their influence with the common people, and, especially, retained control of the domestic rites (sanskara), yet a struggle for spiritual supremacy began between Buddhist monks and Brahman priests which lasted, with varying fortunes for ten centuries. At all events, it ended after the death of king Harsha of Thanesar (650 AD) in the complete victory of Brahmanism. This was also the time of great social changes and turbulence as the country saw foreign invasions which began with the expedition of Alexander the great and ended with the inroad of the Huns in the fifth century AD; and constant warfare gradually weakened, and finally destroyed, the military power of the Kashatriyas.

Of these newcomers, some were barbarians as alien from the Hindus as the Dasyu had been from the Arya. The intrusion of these foreigners into a fastidious and
exclusive society necessarily tightened anew the endogamous restrictions which had previously been somewhat relaxed.

The final stage in the evolution of caste seems to have been reached between the death of Harsha of Thanesar in 650 AD and the end of the twelfth century. This was one of the darkest periods of Indian History, when the country was broken up into many petty kingdoms and states, that were constantly at war with each other and with what was left of the aboriginal and foreign tribes. Distances were great, communications were bad, travelling was unsafe, each state was compelled to be self supporting, and so were evolved the numerous local subdivisions of widespread castes. And because no man dared go far afield in search of a bride or of customers, these local groups became perforce endogamous and the custom of hereditary function was strengthened. Nor did the advent of the Muhammadan power ameliorate the situation, till the strong rule of Akbar and his successors brought comparative peace to the people. But after Aurangzeb’s death, disorder broke out again and eventually the English appeared in the scene.

With the advent of the British as the political head of society things were bound to take on a different aspect. The British brought with them their own traditional form of government, and as Christians they could not have much sympathy with the institutions of the Hindus. As prudent foreigners wishing to consolidate their power over a strange land and people, they decided to leave the peculiar institutions of the country severely alone except where it egregiously violated their cherished ideas of government. They introduced a system of education which did not demand of the learners for any change of his religion. The policy of comparative non-interference
naturally gave scope for the revolt of castes that were not quite comfortable under the Brahmin supremacy. Later on, with the incoming of modern industrial organisation and the growth of industrial cities, large numbers of people congregated in cities of mixed populations, away from the influence of their homes and unobserved by their caste or village people.

Early in the history of the British rule the practice of the rulers over the three Presidencies was not uniform. In Bengal one of the regulations, while recognising the integrity of caste organisation, allowed suits for restoration of caste to be entertained by the ordinary courts. In Bombay, however, the pertinent regulation expressly provided that no court shall interfere in any caste question. It was held that the social privileges of the membership of a caste are held to be wholly within the jurisdiction of the caste, and hence, the caste proceedings must be according to usage. However, this recognition of the integrity of caste internal affairs did not protect the institution from inroads on some of its very vital powers. The establishment of British courts, administering a uniform criminal law, removed from the purview of caste many matters that used to be erstwhile adjudicated by it. The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 contained several clauses practically violating the customs of the so-called lower castes. As early as 1876, the High Court of Bombay ruled that the courts of law will not recognise the authority of a caste to declare a marriage void or to give permission to woman to remarry.

The Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 dealt another blow to the integrity of caste. The Act could not, as was expected from its title, remove civil disabilities existing between caste and caste but facilitated conversion to another religion or
admission into another caste notwithstanding any custom of caste disinheriting a
person for change of caste or religion, this Act provided that a person does not forfeit
his ordinary rights of property by loss of caste or change of religion.

The Special Marriage Act of 1872 made it possible for an Indian of whatever
caste or creed to enter into a valid marriage with a person belonging to any caste or
creed, provided the parties registered the contract of marriage, declaring inter alia that
they did not belong to any religion.

Under the old regime of caste certain sections of Hindu society which were
regarded as untouchable were devoid of many of the civil rights. The question of
removing their disabilities and place them on a footing of civil equality came up for
consideration before the British administrators. On the issue of admission of low caste
pupils into schools, it was resolved that all schools maintained at the sole cost of
government shall be open to all classes of its subjects without distinction. In 1923 the
government issued a resolution that no grants would be paid to any aided educational
institution which refused admission to the children of the depressed classes. By this
time the earlier practice of segregating the depressed class boys was fast disappearing.
In 1925 a Bill was introduced in the Madras Legislature Council throwing open all
public resorts to all classes of people including the Depressed.

The majority of the castes which were under various disabilities, excluding the
depressed classes, were non Brahmin. The uniform laws of the British did not
recognise any of these disabilities as lawful. Yet the services were mainly manned by
Brahmin and allied castes who were the first to profit by English education.14 After a

14 Report by Dr. B. R Ambedkar Member of Committee appointed by the Bombay Legislature Council
to cooperate with the Statutory Commission submitted on 17 May, 1929, Chanchrik, k. L.(ed.) Dr. B.
pretty long time and persistent efforts made by non-Brahmin leaders especially the late Maharaja of Kholapur, in the Reformed constitution framed by Montague and Lord Chelmsford special representation through mixed electorates was conceded to the non-Brahmins.

The unique institution of caste did not fail to arouse intellectual curiosity among the more intelligent of the Britishers in India official as well as non-officials and the known understanding of the caste institution is largely helped by their work. Some of the early officials like Elliot, Dalton, Sherring and Nesfield evinced their interest in the subject by collecting information and publishing it with their comments. Later officials, however, adopted the earlier method of utilising the decennial census for collecting and presenting the information and indulging in the theories of origin of castes. Though the Britishers never assigned any valid public reason for an elaborate treatment of caste in the census yet it generated many unwarranted trends in the society. Various ambitious castes quickly perceived the chances of raising their status. They invited conferences of their members, and formed councils to take steps to see that their status was recorded in the way they thought was honourable to them. Other castes that could not but resent this 'stealthy' procedure to advance, equally eagerly began to controvert their claims. Thus a campaign of mutual recrimination was set on foot. The leaders of all but the highest castes frankly looked upon the census as an opportunity for pressing and perhaps obtaining some recognition of social claim which

15 Kitts, Eustace, J, A Compendium of the Castes and Tribes found in India compiled from the (1881) Census Report of various Provinces (Excluding Burma) and native States of Empire (Bombay:Education Society Press), 1885.
were denied by persons of castes higher than their own.\textsuperscript{16} Thus for numerous castes sabhas sprang up, each keen to assert the dignity of the social group which it represented.

It is difficult to see any valid public reason for that elaborate treatment of caste in the Census Reports. The Government never avowed their intention of helping every caste to retain its numbers and prosperity. Nor had they at any time helped a particular caste because it registered numerical decline or economic dislocation. Anyway, the conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the early official was mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given to it in the census which had become progressively elaborate in each successive Census since 1872. The total result was a livening up of the caste spirit.

The British removed all the legal inequality in the treatment of different caste particularly the so-called low castes. They introduced uniform laws and certain administrative measures to that effect. Only in case of depressed castes the government did not proceed to the logical end. On the issue of denial of access to temple to the depressed classes the Government did nothing though sometime a number of temples were in receipt of substantial grant toward their maintenance and thus fit to intervene as a matter of public policy.

The British Government did not recognise caste as a unit empowered to administer justice. Caste was thus shorn of its important function as a community. Individual members might, therefore, were expected to feel less of the old feeling of solidarity for their caste -group. But nothing of this kind is observed to have taken

\textsuperscript{16} Bengal Census 1921, Government of India, p.346.
place. First, though a caste could not administer justice, the government would not set aside the customs of a caste in matters of civil law unless they were opposed to public policy. Caste thus retained its cultural integrity. Secondly, many other aspects of the British Administration such as the Census provided more than sufficient incentive for the consolidation of the caste-group. Mr. Middleton, one of the two Superintendents of Census operations of 1921, made eloquent remarks about the effects of the British Administration on caste in the Punjab. He observed, “I had intended pointing out that there is a very wide revolt against the classification of occupational castes, that these castes have been largely manufactured and almost entirely preserved as separate castes by the British Government, our land records and official documents have added iron bonds to the old rigidity of caste. Caste in itself was rigid among the higher castes, but malleable amongst the lower. We pigeon-holed every one by caste, and if could not find a true caste for them, labelled them with the name of an hereditary occupation. We deplore the caste system and its effect on social and economic problems, but we are largely responsible for the system we deplore. Left to themselves such castes as Sonar and Lohar would rapidly disappear and no one would suffer.... Government’s passion for castes and pigeon-holes has led to crystallisation of the caste system, which except amongst the aristocratic castes, was really very fluid under indigenous rule.... If the government would ignore caste it would gradually be replaced by something very different amongst the lower castes.”17 The situation in the Punjab at that time can not be taken as typical of other provinces. It is well known that the Punjab was not much influenced by rigid caste system. Yet the process of pigeon holing and thus

17 Punjab Census 1921, Government of India, pp. 434-35.
stereotyping has undoubtedly counteracted whatever good results might have ensured from the dethronement of caste as a unit of administration of justice. The total effect has been, at the least, to keep caste-solidarity quite intact.

Thus the activities of the British Government have had gone very little towards the solution of the problem of caste. Most of these activities were dictated by prudence of administration and not by a desire to reduce rigidity of caste, whose disadvantages were so patent to them.

On the whole, the British rulers of India, who throughout professed to be the trustees of the welfare of the country, never seem to have given much thought to the problem of caste, in so far it affects the nationhood of India. Nor did they show willingness to take bold step rendering caste innocuous. Their measures generally have been promulgated piecemeal and with due regard to the safety of British domination.

If the British masters of India did not take comprehensive steps to minimise the evil effects of caste which they openly deplored, it must be said to their credit they did not at least consciously foster the institution. But in face of the facts, after the rising of 1857 was quelled, it is not possible to endorse this view. The rising opened the eyes of the administrators of the country as well as the students of British Indian history to the potentialities of caste. It was almost the unanimous opinion of the persons concerned with the Government of India that the deep causes of the rising were to be found in the fact that the Bengal Army was composed of largely of the higher castes, viz. the Brahmins and the Rajputs. The special commission presided over by Lord Peel, which was appointed to suggest reorganisation of the Indian Army, took evidence from many high officials who were sometime or other closely connected with India. Lord
Elphinstone opined that it was desirable that men of different castes should be enlisted in the Army, while Major General H.T. Tucker went further and insisted on the necessity of keeping the country under British domination through the policy of dividing and separating into distinct bodies the nationalities and castes recruited to the Army. Such being the general tenor of the main bulk of evidence the commission recommended that “the native Indian army should be composed of different nationalities and castes and as a general rule mixed promiscuously through each regiment”. Ever since then the Indian Army under the British rule was studiously purged of the higher castes. The lesson of the rising, viz., that the safety of the British domination in India was very closely connected with keeping the Indian people divided on the lines of castes, was driven home to the British rulers. Some officials like Sir Lapel Griffin thought that caste was useful in preventing rebellion. The maxim of divide and rule began to be preached by historians and journalists alike. Because the rising was largely the work of soldiers of the high castes of Brahmins and Rajputs, there was a clamour in England that the high caste sepoys should be exterminated. The valuable lesson so dearly purchased was not to be lost. It was repeated in the form of the general principle of divide and rule and could not have failed to influence the policy and conduct of later officials.

The British brought with them a casteless culture and a literature full of thoughts on individual liberty. With the introduction of English education many of the intelligent minds of the country came in close contact with the religion of the rulers and

---

with some outstanding personalities amongst them. As a result some Indian like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Devendra Nath Tagore started movements, which aimed at liberating religion and practising the brotherhood of man. The Brahmo Samaj had not only monotheism to preach but also to establish a brotherhood wherein man shall not be divided from man because of caste. The Bombay Prathana Samaj, inspired by the ideal of Brahmo Samaj also thrown caste over board as a matters of its basic tenets. While this movement of repudiating caste was being fostered, other capable Hindu minds thought of remodelling Hindu society after the pristine ideals supposed to be enshrined in the Vedas. Swami Dayanand preached that the fourfold division of Hindu people should be substituted for the manifold ramifications of contemporary caste. The one important innovation that this school of thought carried out in its programme of reconstruction was that even the fourth class of the Hindu society viz. the Shudras, could study the Vedas. The Arya Samaj movement of Swami Dayanand met with manifest success particularly in Punjab where caste has been flexible.

Movements against caste of a more militant nature were not slow to arise. In 1873 Jotirao Phooley of Poona, though a man of Mali caste and of comparatively little education, started an association of members called the Satyasodhak Samaj with the purpose of asserting the worth of man irrespective of caste. Other individual workers like V.R. Shinde and A.V. Thakkar had done much not only to rouse the feeling of the caste – Hindus against the unjust doctrine of untouchability but also to prepare depressed classes for better treatment by spreading education amongst them. The problem of the removal of untouchability was made a national one through the efforts a

Mahatma Gandhi. The liberalising aspect of certain administrative rules by the British ruler also bore fruits. The campaign was in no small measure, benefited by the effects made by Christian and Muhammadan missionaries to convert the depressed classes to their faiths. The more reasonable section of the high caste Hindus sensed a real danger to their faith in allowing their doctrine of untouchability to derive away into the folds of other faiths members of the untouchable castes, members who have been quite good and devout Hindus.

The result of that many sided attack was the change of viewpoint and attitude of many a member of the higher castes. They introduced various reforms on their own as to their treatments of untouchables, their (untouchables) entry into temples and conduct of their own castemen as regards to seeking of dowry in marriage. The growth of city life with its migratory population gave rise to hotels and restaurants. The exigencies of office work forced city people to put aside their old ideas of purity. Caste Hindus have to eat articles of food prepared by Christians, Musalmans, or Persians, because Hindu restaurants have not been easily or equally accessible during office hours. In Hindu eating- houses, they have to take their meals in the company of people of almost any caste as the hotel keeper can not manage to reserve accommodation for members of different castes.

The opening of industries and appointment to Government jobs without any preference to castes also helped to loosen the grip of caste factor on the society. For example in the textile mills of Bombay not a few members of even the untouchable castes have found work quite different from what they were used to under the regime of caste. Whatever restrictions caste imposed on the choice of occupation largely
ceased to guide individuals, and it is ignorance and lack of enterprise that kept the occupational unfreedom of caste, even to the extent that it observed, and not the old ideas of what was considered to be one’s traditional or hereditary occupation.

To sum up, by the end of British rule over India, social and religions privileges and disabilities born of caste were no longer recognised in law and only partially in custom. Only the depressed classes were labouring under certain customary and semi-legal disabilities. Caste no longer rigidly determined as individual occupation, but continued to prescribe almost in its old rigour the circle into which one was to marry.