



# **Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India**

*Nicholas B. Dirks*

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## **Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India** Nicholas B. Dirks

When thinking of India, it is hard not to think of caste. In academic and common parlance alike, caste has become a central symbol for India, marking it as fundamentally different from other places while expressing its essence. Nicholas Dirks argues that caste is, in fact, neither an unchanged survival of ancient India nor a single system that reflects a core cultural value. Rather than a basic expression of Indian tradition, caste is a modern phenomenon--the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and British colonial rule. Dirks does not contend that caste was invented by the British. But under British domination caste did become a single term capable of naming and above all subsuming India's diverse forms of social identity and organization.

Dirks traces the career of caste from the medieval kingdoms of southern India to the textual traces of early colonial archives; from the commentaries of an eighteenth-century Jesuit to the enumerative obsessions of the late-nineteenth-century census; from the ethnographic writings of colonial administrators to those of twentieth-century Indian scholars seeking to rescue ethnography from its colonial legacy. The book also surveys the rise of caste politics in the twentieth century, focusing in particular on the emergence of caste-based movements that have threatened nationalist consensus.

*Castes of Mind* is an ambitious book, written by an accomplished scholar with a rare mastery of centuries of Indian history and anthropology. It uses the idea of caste as the basis for a magisterial history of modern India. And in making a powerful case that the colonial past continues to haunt the Indian present, it makes an important contribution to current postcolonial theory and scholarship on contemporary Indian politics.

## **Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India Details**

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## Deepak Daniel says

As i read through this book one of the things that i realized is the too many loose ends. There are too many polemics without substantive follow through justifications.

This book is in an important sense, a continuation of his pioneering doctoral thesis "The Hollow crown : Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom". His main argument in that book was to debunk the commonly held notion that caste is the organizing principle of Indian society. The belief among historians that in India, the state if at all it existed was peripheral, with kings subsumed in the sacerdotal power of the Brahmans. In that book he makes the case that until the coming of the British, Kings in India had real power and "caste is embedded in the political context of kingship".

This book takes the argument one step further. In this book he argues that caste in its modern form(as we know it) is an outcome of its colonial encounter. There are many nuances here. Dirks does not make an argument that caste did not exist in precolonial India. His argument is that other than for the Brahmans at the top and their polar opposites, the untouchables at the bottom, the middle was a muddle which was an arena for political contestation. Politics in the form of kingship profoundly affected it. Dirks argument in this book is that with political authority in the form of kings removed, colonial understanding of caste started to shape and distort the historical form of caste.

The book with all its complicated sociological language and reasoning's was difficult for me to follow. But I could never get to understand the complicated rhetorical conclusions that Dirks arrives from particular actions of colonial administrators. Yes, the British tried to understand Indian society from the point of caste, an outcome of that being the archives, the census, the classification of criminal tribes et al. This might have changed an Indian's understanding of caste but how did it change an Indian's particular lived experience of caste. In simple words, in a local Indian village, did this colonial knowledge, change the way caste life was experienced. Yes,there are examples of castes vertically aligned in the ancien-regime who clamored for higher status in horizontal agglomerations. But does this merit the charge that caste was totally transformed. In conclusion this already contested topic is made more difficult by Dirks relentless imputation of motives on the British. I got the feeling that this book is in a long line of books which reflect current multicultural western world's constant need to move away from the its very European origins of which colonialism was a part. That would be fine as long as biases do not affect scholarship.

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## Anyusha Rose says

This is a really fantastic book, and gives an excellent historical background and historiographical assessment of caste debates and politics across the last two centuries.

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## Roger Green says

Published in 2001, this book gives a nuanced history of the caste system as it was transformed under colonial rule, imbricated within ethnographic and anthropometric data collection, and used in various ways within political agendas - both secular and religious - in postcolonial India. Dirks concludes with an explicit discussion of controversies within academic fields of history and postcolonial studies, tempering pseudo-

marxist analyses that we might now call "neoliberal" with critical yet porous account of colonial history and its ongoing influences.

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### **Zahen Khan says**

Though a bit too academic, this is a great book on that most Indian of concepts. Dirks main contention is that caste, prior to colonialism, was a fluid, guild system (but unlike Europe's it was not feudal), whereby guilds were intricately, and circularly, connected in the performance of judiciary, corporate and political duties.

The second is that the British, partially in an attempt to make sense of a social system which was unheard of in the newly invented European nation-state, carried out extensive ethnographic studies to establish a structure which would ease the administration of their revenue systems. Indians then started to conform to the British idea, making caste the rigid, and hierarchical system it is today.

It's not difficult to believe the second view, given colonialism's effects on the colonized and their identity. Moreover, Dirks does a great job of researching primary and secondary sources to back his claim. The problem is the first one, as there is very little historical material of Ancient India, so the question of caste fluidity and mobility goes unanswered, at least in this book.

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### **Robert Fischer says**

This book is extremely dense, and assumes a fair bit of familiarity with the on-the-ground politics of caste in India. Given that, though, it's extremely good. It provides a very thorough critique of the idea that caste in India was an eternal system with strong boundaries, instead demonstrating (fairly effectively) that caste, especially in the four-fold Varna conception, was reified within Indians in response to the application of the British colonial epistemology, especially ethnology, philology, and census-taking. It's really a book for academics about the academic project of understanding the Indian sub-continent, but if you are at all interested in that project, this book should be on your to-read or have-read list.

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### **Nils says**

In a nutshell, caste is not an age old product of Indian "tradition" but instead was reified for instrumental purposes by 19th century British imperialists to serve as an alternative to the kind of civil society that was demanding democracy and self-determination back in Europe. Caste, in its timelessness, put India outside of history and thus enabled the indefinite deferral of questions of independence. But the most interesting part of Dirks's account is how he demonstrates the many contradictory performative uses of the concept of caste throughout the last two hundred years of Indian history, especially in the postcolonial period, where the persistence of caste became an increasing embarrassment. Like many another great book, it is also an explicit takedown of an earlier titan in the field, in this case, Louis Dumont.

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## **AskHistorians says**

Dirks sets forth the idea of "the ethnographic state" and alters the more conventional understanding of the caste system as an age-old tradition that haunted Indian society. Dirks highlights the varied ways in which the colonial state made rigid the fluid boundaries of caste through their need to categorise, tabulate, and catalogue the Indian population.

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## **Anita says**

Strong argument that the British reified and made more rigid the caste system for their own colonial purposes. Also some interesting history about Ambedkar, Periyar and Gandhi and their different positions on caste and its importance to Hinduism. Four stars because there are some spots in the book where the text was so academic/dense or cited British historians whose work I hadn't read, I wasn't sure the history described really backed up what the author was claiming. Also wished there was a little more to support the author's commentary on "pariahs" (intercaste people) as untouchables - I had never heard of this before - in my understanding the word "pariahs" referred to a specific Tamil Dalit group, but intercaste people typically took on their father's caste.

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