CHAPTER ONE
THE BIRTH OF CASTE

When thinking of India, it is hard not to think of caste.
– Nicholas Dirks, 2001

‘Caste’ as the Master Key to Understanding India

Dirks wrote in 2001 that in both comparative sociology and common parlance, caste had become a “central symbol for India, indexing it as fundamentally different from other places as well as expressing its essence.”¹ This chapter will trace how that came about. Let us begin with the anthropologist Morton Klass’s penetrating comment that there is no exact equivalent of the word “caste” in Indian languages; English borrowed it from Portuguese in the same way as it borrowed “taboo” from Polynesian. He points out that there were possible English equivalents, such as people, race, nation, tribe, clan, and ethnic group, any of which could all have been used to translate jāti; or that term might itself have been adopted, as many other Indic terms have been.² Ultimately, however, the Portuguese term prevailed. Once chosen, it was reinserted in translations of earlier terminology—as for example, the Greco-Roman writer Arrian’s citation (c. 180 CE) of Megasthenes’ reports from India.³

Klass also made another important point: early Europeans immediately moved from the observed norm of community endogamy to an inferred motive—preserving “purity of blood.” He noted that this inference said more about the early modern West than about India, where purity was seen as much wider than merely “pure descent.” The term “caste” thus mingled

¹ Nicholas Dirks, Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India Indian edition (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 3, for both quotes.
² Morton Klass, Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System second edition [1993] (Delhi: Manohar, 1998), 25–26; many other names were in fact employed before the Indological need to have a unique label prevailed: see citations in p. 28, note 32 and p. 30, note 40.
³ Klass, Caste, 22.
emerging European notions of ‘racial’ purity with Hindu notions of religious purity (which however also included ideas of contamination of bodily substance). It then created categories such as ‘half-caste’ which were meaningless within a jāti-varṇa system. At the practical level of governance however, the Portuguese and early western regimes managed Asian society through community organizations and used the casta/gente label indiscriminately for both Hindu and non-Hindu communities. In that respect, they were following local statecraft, which similarly dealt with bounded communities for various purposes. In the twentieth century these structures lost much of their operational significance for the state. It was then that academic theorists cut off the non-Hindu communities and moved increasingly toward a ‘religious values’ definition of ‘caste’. That in turn, has been challenged by scholars from several disciplines as they sought to grasp the actual workings of an old and complex society. Successive sections of this chapter will elaborate each of these arguments.

Names and Things, or Who Invented ‘Caste’?

Soon after the early Portuguese conquests in Asian waters, their tongue became a major lingua franca in the Asian seas. Late-coming European powers contested Portuguese empire but still adopted the Portuguese language for navigational, business, and geographical knowledge. Portuguese speakers were important as interpreters, sailors, soldiers, clerks, concubines, and wives in the entourages of their rivals for a century or more. The English successor regime to Portuguese dominance drew heavily on Indo-Portuguese personnel and traditions, especially coastal India where they succeeded the Portuguese as the dominant naval power. The same applied

---

4 Klass, Caste, 28–30.
5 As early as 1640, the Dutch in the Malukas (Indonesia) referred to their soldiers as having wives belonging to the Portuguese ‘casta’. David Lopes, Expansao da Língua Portuguesa no Oriente durante os seculos XVI, XVII e XVIII second edition, edited with a Preface and Notes by Luis de Matos (Porto: Portucalense Editora, 1969), 104.
6 A valuable account of this phenomenon with a large anthology of citations from original sources is to be found in Lopes, Expansao da Língua Portuguesa. In the early eighteenth century it was commonly used by northern Europeans not merely to communicate with Asians and Africans but even across different European communities; see Lopes, ibid., 70, 74–77, 85.
8 Nearly seventy years after the island was ceded to the English Crown, the headmen of the various Hindu communities still reported their findings to the Court in Bombay “in the