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Conclusion

Dis-embedding and Reconstituting Caste in South Asia and the US

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The essays gathered in this issue invite us to think about past and present constellations of race, caste, and religious identity; and they do so in productive—because intersectional and concrete—ways. Together they represent a fine illustration of what may come from leaving behind essentialized categories and their supporting taxonomies in order to think about the political, economic, and social factors that work to shape perceptions of cultural difference within concrete 'historical conjunctures', which is how caste and race should be approached (Bethencourt 2013). While this special issue might in some respects appear to centre itself around the 'core' issue of caste, the authors work effectively to question and destabilise any such core reality. What they reveal, by contrast, is the fluid, contested, and fundamentally ambiguous character of this phenomenon we so readily call caste. In this respect the essays resonate with a range of generative scholarship dedicated to moving reflection on caste and colonialism beyond essentialized models and Orientalist fictions that have for so long worked to figure caste as the 'constitutive institution of Indian civilization' (for a critique of which, see Inden 1990: 82). Here I think of a range of work that situates caste within the political landscapes and historical contexts of premodern and colonial South Asia (see Bayly 1989, 1999, Dirks 1987, O'Hanlon 1985). The force of this scholarship on caste has been to demand that scholars orient themselves more explicitly to the dynamics of politics and the expression of power. It is no longer adequate to advance theories of caste predicated on appeals to Hinduism writ large, or on social-scientific models claiming to reflect a static 'Indian culture'. And while the unmasking of colonial constructions of caste has proven salutary for interrogating the genealogy of sociological models (see Dirks 2001), authors like Rosalind O'Hanlon have also shown that too much emphasis on colonial transformations blinds us to the reality that caste-based systems had been in flux during the centuries prior to British rule (see O'Hanlon 2017). Situating caste in different historical contexts allows us to appreciate how its significance shifts with arguments and counterclaims over social recognition (whether in terms of occupation, birth right, property, status, or entitlement). It attunes us to the many ways Brahmins, merchants, labourers, renunciants, and others negotiated their political and economic worlds. Put simply, we are led to think more carefully about power.

This is precisely what the essays in this special issue do, helping us to appreciate a point made by Francisco Bethencourt regarding the operation of systems of racial or ethnic discrimination, which is to say that an awareness of difference predicated on ideas of descent may be a necessary condition for racism to exist; and yet, sheer awareness of difference is not enough to constitute racism. For that, Bethencourt has pointed out, one needs the added element of discriminatory action (2013: 1, *passim*). To consider the operation of discrimination is to confront the problem of power. Power operates by, and is expressed through, the construction of boundaries. The basis for constructing boundaries can be understood in terms of what Bethencourt calls 'prejudice', which is his word for the awareness of ethnic difference. Groups have such prejudices, which are employed when framing judgments about competitors in an economic or political space or about those considered to be inferior. Bethencourt's research

on racism within the Iberian imperial context, and his theorisation of ethnic identity, are important for the work of Sumit Guha (2013), who takes the arrival of the Portuguese as one important historical conjuncture during which we may consider the modern emergence of 'caste'. Guha notes, for instance, that while the Portuguese introduced into South Asia new idioms around 'blood purity' (*limpieza de sangre*)—and the systems of social stratification thereby enacted—this new mode of classifying human communities also took its place amid a host of pre-existing conceptual categories (e.g. *jat*, *qaum*, *qabila*). As such, anxieties around 'stained descent', for instance, would necessarily become layered among existing South Asian categories (for instance, *varna-samkara*). And in due course the picture would be further complicated by the innovations of British colonial policies and the rise of 19th-century race science. To find a single master key that can explain 'caste' should thus be seen as impossible. Guha invites us to think instead of the South Asian landscape as a 'palimpsest' within which a new British imperial formation would establish itself as the hegemonic 'ruling caste'. This new ruling power dis-embedded a range of existing political structures, while simultaneously embedding itself on a higher scale (Guha 2013: 183). This is the perfect conjuncture to take up the essays in this volume, since they provide detailed case studies that reveal how the dis-embedding and re-composing of caste takes place. What is more, the essays pursue the histories of race, caste, and conversion down to the present day, helping us appreciate how ethnic claims in the United States can work both to challenge inequality and to re-entrench privilege within the same democratic landscape.

As I read them, these essays evince an appropriate concern with the boundary-making and boundary-breaking work of power. The problems of caste, religion, and racial categorization lend themselves here to consideration of how prejudice about different corporate entities (which following Bethencourt we might think of as ethnicities) translates into discriminatory action, and in some cases resistance thereto. Thus in Dandekar's treatment, the well-known figure of Pandita Ramabai is no longer wreathed in a halo of hagiography that owes its radiance to preconceived notions of Hindu or Christian identity; instead she is shown to be a sovereign agent who possesses the power to contest the very boundaries foisted on her. And importantly, Dandekar helps us see that Ramabai does this in and through the boundary-making work of institution-building in her sovereign image: Ramabai *is* Mukti Mission, as the visual record attests. I appreciate the essay by Jones along similar lines, finding in it an occasion to think about Begum Samru's idiosyncratic exercise of sovereignty—both political and classificatory; here was a woman ruler who seemed to employ the strategic deferral of religious and ethnic identity as the best method for securing her ruling power. One cannot read such treatments and not think about what Kent calls in her essay the 'thrust and parry' of prejudice, wherein the emerging taxonomies of colonial caste and religious identity simultaneously afford occasions for self-making and surround it with new limits. In this critical context, Sister Geraldine's concern with Pandita Ramabai's putative sin of pride takes on special resonance; it turns out the 'prejudice' Geraldine sought to eradicate is the symbolic marker of her own practice of racial and ethnic discrimination. Ramabai appreciated this, and she responded artfully to the classificatory awareness foisted on her. Tschacher's essay helps further complicate the push and pull of prejudice under specific historical conditions. He provides something like a cartography of racialisation as played out among Muslims and others in the Tamil region and colonial Ceylon. Along the way he offers us important material for thinking about a point stressed by Guha in his work; namely, the "criteria of social awareness" (Guha 2013: 176 n5, quoting Kothari 1970 [2010]) in given contexts turn out to be mutable—as we see from Tschacher's review of the shifting attitudes toward 'foreign born' or 'racially Indian' Muslims. To borrow from Kent's essay, we find ourselves watching 'race-making in action'. The contemporary critical repercussions of arriving at this kind of historically nuanced understanding of identity formation are brought home powerfully in Thomas's study of the

discourse of race and caste among Syro-Malabar Christians. The challenges she describes for today's Dalit Bahujan South Asian Americans—who face the erasure of caste-based injuries by the competing discourse of racial identity—should remind us of another of Bethencourt's observations, which is that the kinds of discriminations enacted in relation to caste, religious, or racial identity are necessarily "political projects . . . connected to specific economic conditions" (2013: 6). And as caste continues to structure and complicate politics in both the United States and Narendra Modi's India, we do well to attend to the ways in which the organization of our social lives speaks to the shifting, and not always obvious, work of prejudice.

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