

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Singh, Hira, *Recasting Caste: From the Sacred to the Profane*. New Delhi: Sage, 2014. 287 pp., \$49.95 hardcover (9788132113461)

Hira Singh's monograph *Recasting Caste*, is an important contribution to the field of sociology of caste, which uses a nuanced Marxist perspective to conclude that "sociologists of caste have invoked religion, cognition, cosmology...to find the secret of the genesis, growth, and survival of caste and the caste system. In the process, they have missed the real secret of caste and the caste system, which lies in the intersection of political economy and ideology" (16). Singh demonstrates how the economic infrastructure intersects with the cultural superstructure to (re)produce the practice and hegemony of caste based inequalities.

Singh intervenes in an area, which has been dominated by the orientalist and colonial view of caste. The orientalist-colonial sociology of caste (e.g., Weber and Dumont) helped to introduce first *a discourse of backwardness*, and secondly *a discourse of differentiation* in the study of South Asia (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 11). *Recasting Caste* not only revives the Marxist analysis (Kumar 1965; Mencher 1974) of caste, but it also takes it further by introducing a transnational analysis of caste to the Marxist framework.

The book is divided into seven chapters, the first three of which are Singh's critique of the orientalist-colonial sociology of caste. Singh argues that caste is a system of inequality, which is based on unequal access to the material conditions (e.g., land) of existence. Drawing on archival evidence, Singh also shows that the legitimization of the profane kingship was in its essence a political rather than a religious phenomenon as theorized by Dumont. The decisive factor in legitimizing kingship was the legitimization of the authority of the prince by his peers – the fraternity of landlords, members of his own caste and kin group, who were different and distant from the "sacred" priestly caste.

After having established, that the Weberian and Dumontian sociological theories of caste mystify caste by masking *the material foundation* of caste inequality i.e. the inequality of land relations and the corresponding inequalities of access to political and cultural resources (63-105), Singh moves on to critically examine the scholarship on caste produced by the Subaltern Studies group. This examination is a solid

contribution to the growing field of “the critique of subaltern historiography”, that has gained momentum in recent times with the publication of Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013). Singh focuses on how the subaltern studies have examined the relationship between caste and class in agrarian social structure and movements (152). Following extensive discussions, Singh arrives at a riveting conclusion. The subaltern scholars, in particular Chatterjee has argued that caste based religion could act as a form of consciousness that enables the subaltern to resist domination. Singh provides a compelling critique of this perspective by stating that Chatterjee overlooks the role of (caste based) religion as an instrument of domination used by the elite to justify subaltern inferiority in various situations such as slavery, serfdom, gender and caste oppressions. Furthermore, Singh points out that like mainstream Indian sociology, the Subaltern approach on caste and religion misses that religion is not of itself the basis of caste hierarchy. *Rather, religion is the legitimating principle, not the basis of caste inequality.* By using ethnographic and archival materials, Singh shows the shortcomings in the claim that the subaltern consciousness is wholly sacred (168-169). The misrecognition on the part of Subaltern approach makes it a form of “elite ideology” which propagates a form of Indian exceptionalism and orientalism, states Singh.

However, the most persuasive argument in support of the view that caste has a strong connection with land ownership and the political economy, is furnished by Singh in the chapter (“Indenture, Religion and Caste: The Twin Myths about Hinduism and Caste”). Since 1834, following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, until the end of the World War I, around 1,336,034 indentured Indians were transported to the British colonies in Fiji, Caribbean and South Africa. The history of indentured Indians is often left out in the historiography of India’s colonization and decolonization (225). Singh provides a succinct synthesis of the history of indentured Indians in the context of post-abolition labor shortages in imperial economy. The chapter contains fascinating vignette of imperialist rivalry over indenture Indians, indentured labor as non-white, and the skewed gender ratio among indentured Indians.

But what happened to caste and caste relations during and after indenture? Note that indentured Indians, were overwhelmingly rural poor, hailing from various caste backgrounds. This labor force moved in a peculiar circuit of community-commodity-community (C-C-C) indenture. Irrespective of their social rank in India, indentured Indian emigrants were all reduced to the singular derogatory rank of “coolie”. Although, religion and family the two basic elements of community, were retained

and bolstered in the C-C-C circuit of indenture in the colony, interestingly caste and the caste system were dissolved (233).

Since the major sociological studies of caste underscore an intimate connection between religion and caste, the contradictory situation produced by indenture begs rethinking of the relationship between religion and caste. Singh states that in the context of indenture, caste had no correlation to occupation, since everyone was a collie. Besides, after completing their indenture, the individuals and families made random selection of occupations, resulting in a dissolution of caste based occupations. Instead of caste, race, language and religion emerged as important factors in marital choice among post-indenture Indian communities. *Singh argues that bereft of a caste based political economy (land relations) in the indentured context, Hindu religion survived, but caste did not.* In support of this important thesis on caste, Singh furnishes a significant fact. Unlike indentured Indians, emigrants such as Gujarati Indians (passenger Indians), who did not arrive in South Africa as indentured workers, maintained caste based social interaction. The Gujaratis were free people and they were mostly engaged in trade. But, their general economic condition allowed them greater autonomy to maintain caste based rules of endogamy and commensality (247).

Singh concludes the monograph by emphasizing that the “impurities” of caste are systemic and not religious. Caste is profane masked by the sacred. *Thus, in the absence of economic-political conditions necessary for creating and sustaining the caste system, caste and Hinduism follow different trajectories* (258-259). Weber had emphatically pronounced that without caste there is no Hindu, the case of indentured Indians examined by Singh contradicts that classic voice in sociology. *Recasting Caste* is a laudable effort in the direction of decolonizing the field of sociology of caste. In particular, Singh’s last chapter on caste and indentured labor has the potential to inspire new research in the areas of imperialism, labor, caste and gender from a transnational sociological framework.

There is an issue in the monograph that can arouse readers’ discomfort. Singh does not provide any updated information in the chapter on leadership and caste structure in Uttar Pradesh. He had conducted the fieldwork in 1969, whereas since the 1980s massive changes have come upon the caste based politics of that province.

The most significant insight that will stay with the reader of *Recasting Caste* is that caste is a form of “human made” exploitation and hierarchy, which has insidiously used the ideological masks of *karma* and *dharma* to deny humanity to an overwhelming majority of South Asians. *Recasting Caste* has many dimensions, and its findings contribute to di-

verse areas such as economic sociology, transnational sociology, post-colonial sociology, and theories of inequality.

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