

The Impact of European Colonialism on the Indian Caste System

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To What Extent Were Hinduism and India's Caste System Largely 'Invented' by Europeans?

This essay will establish the extent to which Hinduism and the caste system can be considered a European invention. It will be demonstrated that the content of Hinduism was in no way invented by Europeans but the religious category of Hinduism was. It will be shown that the caste system was part of Hinduism's social content and therefore not invented by Europeans, but simply adapted and utilised by British colonials. This essay will assess the nature of Hinduism and the caste system before, during and after the period of British colonialism in India, while assessing the changes that were brought about by colonialism.

The following section will highlight what aspects of the modern day interpretation of Hinduism existed before British colonialism. Aspects of 'Hinduism' before British colonialism to be observed will be its development from the Indus Valley, Hinduism's tentative existence alongside Islam, and whether Hinduism existed in a religious form. The unifying role of the Sanskrit language will also be observed.

The reason for looking at Hinduism before British involvement will be to demonstrate that before British colonialism there was not a cohesive, self-determined, large-scale 'Hindu' religious group. This therefore would contribute to the conclusion that the concept of a unitary Hindu religion was, at some point, largely invented by British colonialists.

The modern term 'Hindu' more than likely derives from the name given to the people who lived in the areas surrounding the Indus River, located in what is now Pakistan. 'Hindoo' was originally a Persian word used to identify these people[1], demonstrating that it was originally a term of external definition and not a self-determined identity.

The earliest significant civilisation of the Indus Valley was the Harappan civilisation which existed between 3000 and 1500 BCE. The Harappan civilisation was centred around the relatively advanced cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. With an estimated population of 40,000 in each city, which were both described by Fitzsimons as a "utilitarian city-planner's delight,"[2] the sophisticated base for cultural and religious growth is evident. This suggests how the people of the 'Indus' could come to be identifiable as 'Hindus' even after the end of the Harappan civilisation.

It is within Harappan culture that many origins of modern Hindu religion are found. The religion of the Harappan civilisation was typical of river valley areas. Fitzsimons states that "the Harappan religion featured worship of a mother goddess with different manifestations in the realms of vegetable farming and animal-raising and hunting. There was a cult of explicit fertility."[3] A key aspect of modern Hinduism, ritual bathing, is noted by Fitzsimons as being prevalent in the Harappan city of Mohenjo-daro. He states that "almost every building in Mohenjodaro has a bathing area."[4] These similarities demonstrate that the modern Hindu religion has tangible religious roots in the region from where its name derives. However these similarities do not do enough to demonstrate that the Hindu religion has a complete and direct lineage from the Indus Valley Civilisation. This is in support of the claim that multiple sources contributed to what was later generalised as the Hindu religion by British colonials.

Before British colonialism, those who would now be defined as Hindu existed without one collective identity and

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certainly did not possess a unified collective religious identity. The group now defined as Hindu can be said to have existed only because it was a group independent of Islam, Christianity or Judaism, although not internally coherent. The lack of religious coherence within the Hindu group is demonstrated by the fact that they did not view Islam in religious terms. Talbot states that the “assertion that the fourteenth-century epigraphical meaning of Hindu was not primarily a religious one comes from the negative evidence that the terms Islam and Muslim (in its Persian variant, Musalman) never figure in Andhra inscriptions of the fourteenth through mid-seventeenth centuries.”[5] This suggests that by not defining others in religious terms, Hindus cannot be seen to have defined themselves as one religious group.

In the face of Abrahamic religions, one unifying factor of pre-colonial Hinduism is the use of the Sanskrit language. This unifying factor can be considered to be one of cultural as opposed to religious similarities for pre-colonial Hinduism. Sanskrit was an ancient liturgical language used across many religious groups, which made it a standard by which British colonialists could define Hinduism. This is despite evidence that suggests that use of Sanskrit was not exclusively Hindu.

Sanskrit was a useful political tool as it demonstrated a connection to the ancient religions of local populations. Talbot states that endowments and the like were “recorded in Sanskrit on copper plates, a traditionally kingly type of gift and inscriptional medium.”[6] This indicates that the language had potential to be utilised for political as opposed to religious means. This point is further supported by Talbot, who states that “In their quest for acceptance as legitimate kings, chiefs like Prolaya Nayaka and Vema Reddi sought the most prestigious support possible. That included not only the use of the all-India literary language of Sanskrit, the patronage of Brahmins, and the memory of the previous Kakatiya dynasty but also the rich symbolism of the age-old fight against demons and disorder.”[7] This use of Sanskrit and use of various other, what would now be considered, Hindu traditions demonstrates that there was not a pre-determined Hindu religion that could be viewed as being altered and added to.

Buddhism and Jainism are two religions whose liturgical texts are also in the Sanskrit language however they were not considered by the British to be Hindu. At first glance this may seem like British orientalist were aware of the difference between the different religions that use the Sanskrit language. However it can be noted that while Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism contain many similarities, notably for example the belief in Karma, they also contain many differences. Equally within various sects of Hinduism there are also notable disparities. For example, beliefs range between monotheism and polytheism in different denominations. This demonstrates that the size of the disparities between Buddhism and Jainism also exist within the construct of Hinduism itself and that Hinduism cannot be considered as a monolithic religion. The reasons for Buddhism and Jainism therefore not being included within the British generalisation of Hinduism is because they were significantly larger than most Hindu denominations and, more importantly, largely self-determined as individual, separate religions.

Despite considerable association and integration with Islamic traditions in some areas of India, Sanskrit was still used as the one liturgical language used to demonstrate sovereignty despite the prevalence of other religions in India, notably Islam.

This integration with Islam can be exemplified through the study of dress in Vijayanagara which is widely touted as a Hindu area. Wagoner states that “adaptation of Islamicate dress at Vijayanagara was a fundamental part of a broader, far-reaching process of Islamicization, through which selected Indic cultural forms and practices were replaced in key “public” contexts with analogues drawn from a more universal, Islamicate culture.” [8] This suggests a lack of any strict Hindu coherence despite the fact that Vijayanagara and its culture would be largely defined as Hindu by British colonialists. This further demonstrates the fact that Hinduism was not generally viewed as a cohesive religion as Islam was not treated as aggressive on religious grounds. Wagoner concludes that the assimilation of Islamic culture was not due to any aggression of Islam but “the result of conscious and deliberately calculated acts by creative individuals seeking to maximize their opportunities in an ever-widening world.”[9] This demonstrates that Hindus in Vijayanagara, by not feeling threatened by Islam on religious grounds, cannot have viewed themselves as a single religious entity.

A study into the existence of Hinduism before British intervention presents three conclusions with regard to whether

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Europeans invented Hinduism. The first conclusion to be drawn is that the social group of the Indus river valley from where the name Hindu derives did not exist as a recognisably Hindu social group. While aspects of their religious beliefs exist within modern day Hinduism, there is not a coherent religion that survived between then and now.

The second observation is that what would now be considered the Hindu group did not define themselves as a singular religious group, even in the face of Islam, both militarily and culturally.

The third conclusion is that the Sanskrit language, which British scholars would use to generalise Hindus, is the liturgical language for many religious denominations where the majority have been generalised into Hinduism regardless of huge diversity between them.

These conclusions demonstrate that before British invention there did not exist a cohesive and self-determined Hindu religion. The nature in which Hinduism was invented then needs to be established in order to understand how the vast content was generalised into one religion by the British.

During the period of British Colonialism there were three key contributing factors to the invention of Hinduism. The Orientalists such as William Jones and Edward Moor contributed through their academic systematisations and generalisations of Indian religion. Colonial social structures contributed by generalisations of Hinduism through bureaucratic means, and indigenous religious traditions contributed through their construction of Hinduism as a competitor to Christianity. These aspects of 'invention' during the British colonial period will now be explored. Firstly, however an understanding of pre-colonial European conceptions of Hinduism must be achieved.

The 'invention' of Hinduism can be demonstrated by simply observing the contrast between modern day interpretations of Hinduism and pre-colonial European understanding of it. Before the 18th century, Indian culture was viewed as heathen. As King states, "the predominant Christian perspective among the Europeans classified Indian religion under the all-inclusive rubric of Heathenism. On this view there were four major religious groups [in India], Jews, Christians, Mahometans (i.e. Muslims) and Heathens." [10] The term heathen demonstrates a view that religion in India was multi-faceted, with no cohesiveness. By the end of the colonial era in India, Hinduism existed as an accepted cohesive religion. Pennington explains that, "Sometime between 1789 and 1832, the British perception of Hindu religious traditions underwent a seismic shift." [11] This demonstrates that the modern understanding of Hinduism manifested during the British colonial period. The nature of this manifestation needs to be explored in order to investigate whether Hinduism was invented by British colonials, as opposed to Indians themselves.

The first form of Hindu construction was that of the Orientalists, the primary examples being William Jones and Edward Moor. In this form, construction and invention of Hinduism developed through attempts to understand and categorise Hinduism. Due to the naturally Western approach taken by these academics, Indian religion was misconstrued, albeit unintentionally. Dalrymple calls these categorisations "encyclopaedias of the gods of the classical and near-eastern world." [12] The encyclopaedic efforts of these orientalists led to the mass generalisation of many distinct Indian traditions under the umbrella definition of Hinduism.

While doing so with good academic intentions, these Orientalists drew on the expansive materials of Indian culture in such a way that they were treated as connected parts of an overarching culture. This led to the unintentional invention of a religion that never existed before that point in a coherent form. This view is supported by Kopf, who states that, "The work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals, and laws into a coherent religion, and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known now as "Hinduism" were endeavours initiated by Orientalists." [13] This demonstrates that, while their efforts are considered important as encyclopaedic collections, they are seen as inventing Hinduism.

The foremost of these Orientalists can be considered to be Edward Moor whose book *The Hindu Pantheon* is the preeminent early English-language collection of Hindu religion and culture. [14] Through assessment of this work, the desire to define Hinduism in the same way as Western religions becomes particularly obvious. A primary theme seems to be that of the legitimisation of Hinduism in an attempt to demonstrate it as a genuine religion comparable to Christianity. While this demonstrates an affection for Indian culture, it also leads to misconstruction of the reality of

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Hinduism.

Examples from the first chapter alone demonstrate various attempts to show Hinduism in a light that would make it more difficult for Christians to define it as heathen.

An important aspect of Hinduism to emphasize to garner legitimisation in Western circles was elements of monotheism. Moor states that, "Strictly speaking, the *religion* of the *Hindus* is *monotheism*. They worship God in unity, and express their conceptions of the Divine Being and his attributes in the most awful and sublime terms. God, thus adored, is called BRAHM: the One External Mind; the self-existing, incomprehensible Spirit." [15] Considering that this statement is referring to the whole of Hindu culture, it can be considered an unreasonable generalisation.

Further attempts at legitimisation and inadvertent construction are exemplified by Moor when he states, "Although the *Hindus* are taught to address their vows to idols and saints, these are still but types and personifications of the Deity, who is too awful to be contemplated, and too incomprehensible to be described." [16] By stating that Hindus are taught, Moor is implying that a Hindu education structure exists in which a coherent religion is taught, which was not the case. While Indian education was certainly Puranic [17], their teaching was not under a unified code of Hinduism, especially considering that Puranic texts exist additionally in both Buddhism and Jainism. The quote demonstrates attempts at legitimisation through Moor's attempts to show Hinduism as monotheistic. While this is arguably true this is a conclusion invented by Moor as opposed to divulged strictly from Hindu teaching.

Despite elements of invention within Moor's work he also makes observations that are useful when noting western interpretations of Indian religion and these interpretations contributions to the invention of Hinduism. Moor states that Brahma, now viewed as one of the most important deities of Hinduism, was not prevalent in Indian teachings. He observes that, "Brahma, the personification of the *creative power* of the Deity, although the name of the three most familiar perhaps to *European* readers, is, in fact, not so often heard of in *India* as either of the other two great powers of preservation and destruction; or as of several other deities, or incarnations of deities, of an inferior description." [18] This observation suggests Western invention as Brahma, while not widely prevalent in India, was moved to prevalence due to the fact that it was a concept better recognised in the West.

Sir William Jones was an earlier prominent Orientalist who contributed to the invention of Hinduism. Jones made immense contributions to Sanskrit translation and introducing Indian culture to the West. Problems arose however in his attempts at interpretation and assumptions on facts of Indian culture, Dalrymple for example notes that Jones, "passionately believed that the Hindus were a lost tribe of Egypt." [19] This shows an earlier example of attempts to connect Indian culture to recognised 'Western' civilisation in the pursuit of Orientalists to legitimise Indian culture in the eyes of Western Christianity. Cannon states that Jones was attempting to change "Europeans' minds about the Indians." [20] This approach inevitably leads to generalisations and misconstructions of facts especially given the huge subject area being dealt with.

The early Orientalists, while doing so with honest intentions, were key contributors to the invention of Hinduism. The two forms of invention that took place due to orientalist were invention through legitimisation and through generalisation. Additionally to the orientalist, however, there were other factors that contributed to the construction of Hinduism.

The second means through which Hinduism was invented was through India's clash with British social and religious traditions. While there was a large degree of merger of both British and Indian traditions, "the colonial situation determined the rules of the encounter." [21] This meant that British conceptions of Indians would come to more prevalence than Indian conceptions of themselves.

The British Empire utilised modern state institutions, therefore determination of population identity was important. Censuses and other categorising institutions demonstrate British definitions of Hinduism. As Kind demonstrates, "the 1955 Hindu Marriage Act, section 2(1) defines a 'Hindu' as a category including not only all Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs but also anyone who is not a Muslim, a Christian, a Parsee or a Jew." This categorises Hinduism as an "all-inclusive rubric for the non-Judaeo-Christian 'Other'." [22] This negative appellation demonstrates the invention of

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Hinduism as a religion (having been) defined by the ruling British, not by being but by not being an already existing unified religion.

Under colonialism, Indian religion clashed directly with British Christianity. With Christianity being one of the pillars on which the British Empire was built, the religion of Indians was targeted by colonial missionaries in the similar fashion as had happened across the empire. Missionaries would attempt to distinguish between the 'real' religion of Christianity and the allegedly mystical fallacies of Indian religion. King states that "describing religions of the East as 'mystical' is a way of differentiating the essential historical truth of Christianity from its inferior rivals." [23] This attack contributed to the mass generalisation of many 'mystical' Indian religions into Hinduism. This is due to the fact that, in order to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Indian religion, generalisation was necessary simply due to the huge number of belief systems that were being challenged.

The missionary desire to spread Christianity came from the growth of evangelical Christianity and it was this evangelical trend that was most instrumental in the invention and systemization of Hinduism. This is due to evangelical attempts to create a singular definable religious opponent. Pennington states that, "Alongside evangelical Christianity emerged the concept of a unitary Indian religion later known as Hinduism." [24] Without the evangelical drive to spread the teachings of Christianity, the religious requirement for the construction of Hinduism would not exist. An example of generalisation demonstrated by Pennington is the missionary obsession with idol worship. He states that "it was the idol that was blamed for commanding Hindu fascination and worship and thwarting the missionary's crusade for the sweeping religious transformation of India." [25] The vast Hindu population was defined as Hindu not because of their one singular religious worship, but, on the contrary, to cope with the multifaceted religious worship of a vast population.

The impact of colonial social and religious traditions on the invention of Hinduism was very significant. Colonial state institutions contributed to Hinduism's construction by creating the bureaucratic categorising that created Hinduism as a religion due to it not belonging to other religious groups. British religion contributed to Hinduism's invention by creating a coherent religious 'other' in relation to which Christianity could be viewed as superior.

A brief look at the situation after the period of British colonialism demonstrates further evidence of Hindu invention and also demonstrates the nature of this invention.

The Indian colonial uprising of 1957-1958 was part of the common pattern of reactive nationalism. It demonstrates the invention of Hinduism due to the fact that Hindu nationalism only came to prevalence after an extended period of British colonialism, as opposed to an original 'Hindu' resistance. However, the invention is further demonstrated in spite of Hindu nationalism. For example, while Mahatma Ghandi was a "nationalist and pious Hindu," [26] he was not a Hindu nationalist but an Indian nationalist. This suggests that the popular uprising was Indian as opposed to Hindu. This in turn suggests the invention of Hinduism, due to the fact that, if it was not a British construct, the popular uprising would have been of Hindu nationalists, as opposed to Indian nationalists such as Ghandi.

It is important to appreciate that British colonialism's impact on Hinduism is only largely significant because of its relatively recent history. Lorenzen states that there is a tendency among the academia, "to adopt a postcolonialist perspective that privileges the British colonial period as the period in which almost all the major institutions of Indian society and politics were invented or constructed." [27] The predisposition to refer to Indian issues as "precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial" [28] means that there is often an over emphasis placed on the importance of the British in the construction of Indian culture. It can be considered however, that the British did not 'invent' the majority of Hinduism, but merely categorised it as Hinduism. The most significant substantive contribution to Hinduism's creation exist long before any British influence, and Lorenzen's argument demonstrates the reduced relevance that British colonialism will have once it is not an aspect of recent history.

The caste system in India is an ancient part of Indian society. Created through Indian religions, the caste system divides people into four Varna categories; Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (agriculturalists), and Shudras (servants). The Dalits (untouchables) is a group that does not exist within any of the four Varna categories. This section will demonstrate that this caste system is part of the ancient content of Hinduism and therefore should

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not be considered as a British colonial construct and that British involvement and contributions with regards to the caste system are typical of ruling classes in Indian history.

In no way can Caste be considered to be a British colonial construct, it is often argued, as it is evident throughout Indian cultural history. Macdonell states that Caste “has been the chief characteristic of the civilization of India for more than 2500 years, and has marked off Indian civilization from that of the rest of the world as unique.”[29] This uniqueness could not be significantly constructed or altered during the relatively short period of British colonialism.

Caste is mentioned in the Rigveda, one of the Vedas which are among the world’s oldest religious texts and the founding texts of many Indian religions: “The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rājanya made. His thighs became the Vaiśya, from his feet the Śūdra was produced.”[30]

There is certainly a degree of arrogance involved in suggestions that British colonial rule invented a system which first appears between 1700-1100 BCE and is consistently prevalent in Indian texts up to the era of British colonialism.

The caste system also existed in a tangible social context, along with a purely religious context. As Macdonell states, “Turning to the old law-books, of which the code of Manu (about A. D. 200) is the most representative for our purposes, we are confronted with a society that is already strictly organized on a basis of castes.”[31] Any degree of societal organisation based around caste demonstrates that it was not a purely religious concept adapted for social use by British colonialists. A further example is located within the Athasastra in the 4th century BCE. It states as law “That limb of a Śūdra with which he strikes a Brāhman shall be cut off.”[32] This example explicitly demonstrates ancient law focussed on the relationship between different castes.

British colonial rulers would have self-imposed themselves as Brahmin during this evolution of the Caste system. Porter states that, “With a caste organization the priesthood found means to increase their power by recasting scholastic systems, changing and adding to the injunctions they contained, and adapting them more perfectly to their own advantage.”[33] This demonstrates that the British were typical of any rulers, adapting systems to suit their own means.

An assessment of the origins of the caste system demonstrates not only that caste certainly existed before British colonialism, but it existed beyond religious contexts in a very tangible social manner. An assessment of British colonial interaction with the caste system will further demonstrate that caste is not a British invention.

There is a considerable school of thought suggesting that Caste, as well as Hinduism, was a British invention. This argument is not as well supported as the argument that Hinduism was a British construction. This is due to the fact that caste is an ancient feature of Indian culture and therefore caste is an aspect of the content which would be generalised by the British as Hinduism.

Arguments for the ‘invention’ of caste centre more around the way it was utilised within British colonialism. Dirks, for example states that, “Caste achieved its critical colonial position because the British state was successful in separating caste as a social form from its dependence on pre-colonial political processes.”[34] In arguing that caste was a British creation, Dirks notes that it is inevitable for a ruling power to embrace local traditions and utilise them for their own means.

This adaption is also discussed by Vaidyanathan who, while supporting Dirk’s assertions, allows us to draw conclusions on British utilisation of the caste system. He states that “The colonizers were part of the Abrahamic tradition, which believes in homogenization, and the heterogeneous and non-conflicting Indian society would not have suited their design. That might have led them to construct a class-based discriminating society out of the multiple sampradayas and castes co-existing peacefully. After all, history is constructed to suit the colonisers and victors.”[35] Vaidyanathan is indirectly supporting the notion that caste most certainly existed within Indian societal history and that its utilisation by the British was normal practice for the ruling classes in India.

Due to recent efforts to dismantle caste in India the nature in which the caste system is altered can be exemplified in

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a different way. Narayan states that the Dalit are inventing their own caste histories and that “through these caste histories, political parties channelise the dalit sense of identity in their own favour while at the same time swaying them against their political rivals.”[36] This demonstrates the constant reinterpretation of the meaning of caste in a way not in any way exclusive to the colonial era.

The arrogant nature of claiming the caste system to be a British construction is well noted by Lorenzen, who states, “As the Hindi critic Purushottom Agrawal recently quipped: “We Indians may well have been denied the capacity to solve our own problems, but are we so incapable that we could not even create them on our own?””[37] This demonstrates that modern India should not be viewed in a way where even the most Indian of problems is considered to be the product of its most significant interaction with the West, without regard for centuries of independent history. It is, however, inevitable that the modern Caste situation is a direct descendant of the relatively recent events of British colonialism.

The issue of caste invention can be concluded by stating that the caste system is part of the content of what British colonialists generalised as Hinduism. At no point should the British be considered to have invented any of the actual content of Hinduism itself, only the general label given to this content.

This conclusion was reached through an assessment of the origins of the caste system which showed that caste existed in not just a religious context but was also socially implemented. Furthermore it was demonstrated that British contributions to the caste system were typical of pre and post-colonial situations. The caste system is consistently adapted by those with any degree of political power.

The main conclusions drawn on the ‘invention’ of Hinduism by Europeans are twofold. Firstly that British colonials contributed heavily to the categorisation of the religion of Hinduism or of Hinduism as a unified body and system of religious doctrine, texts, rituals and practices, which it had not previously been and secondly that the social and religious content of the Hindu group was not in any way invented but developed over thousands of years. These conclusions are reinforced by observing the caste system, conclusions in this case that the caste system is part of the social content of Hinduism and therefore cannot be considered as having been invented by Europeans. These conclusions were reached by studying these issues before, during and after British colonialism.

Observing the situation before British colonialism demonstrated that the content of Hinduism developed from its roots in the Indus Valley, although a consistent religious group did not exist between then and modern day Hinduism. A Hindu group never existed under a united religious identity, despite all the traditions of modern day Hinduism existing independently before British colonialism. The European viewpoint of religion in India was that all non-Abrahamic religions were considered Heathen. These observations means that the content existed before British colonialism at was at some point during the period generalised into Hinduism.

A study of the situation during British colonialism demonstrates that various factors contributed to the construction of Hinduism. The Orientalists generalised various Indian religious traditions into a coherent Hindu religion. British colonial construction of Hinduism occurred through categorising institutions such as censuses, and Christian Scholars utilised the generalisation of Hinduism in order to create a common religious antagonist due to their missionary nature. These statements demonstrate that British colonialism’s contribution to the ‘invention’ of Hinduism was largely one of generalisation and categorisation.

The caste system had already existed as content of Hindu culture for over 2500 years, While it may have been utilised and changed by British colonialism, it was not invented by it. This further supports the conclusion that the ‘actual’ content of Hinduism was not invented. The only invention was the gathering of content under the definition of Hinduism.

In conclusion, while Hinduism as an appellation can be considered to be a colonial invention all of its content is the result of millennia of social and religious development. The impact of British colonialism is only considered to be so prevalent with regards to Hinduism because it is part of India’s recent history. Hinduism should be considered Indian in every sense, regardless of the general label given to it by colonialists

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