



Caste and Race in India by G. S. Ghurye

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Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 116, No. 5 (March 2011), pp. 1713-1719

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659864>

Accessed: 19/06/2011 17:55

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competitors were able to manipulate political power, economic crises, and financial institutions to their benefit is described in the particulars of each biography, but a more general process or theory does not emerge. It is these mediating mechanisms that connect individual biography to the institutional level that is so urgently needed in the sociology of elites.

That said, we should applaud the authors for challenging popular narratives that justify and rationalize the growing inequality in our societies. Sociologists make a significant contribution to the social sciences and to public policy when they demonstrate that ascribed social factors such as family background, sex, ethnicity, and class origins, rather than individual agency, are at the root of entrepreneurial success. It is a story that cannot be told often enough.

Caste and Race in India. By G. S. Ghurye. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1932. Pp. vii+227.

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It was the tragedy of G. S. Ghurye to be overshadowed by one of his own students—the modest but brilliant M. N. Srinivas. But the difference was as much in historical moment as in scholarship. Ghurye made his career in prepartition British India; subaltern status forged his bitterness. The more fortunate Srinivas had a postcolonial career and was able to join his friend R. K. Narayan in creating a serene vision of a new India—the former in sociology, the latter in fiction.

But Ghurye was a great man, author of ten thousand pages on subjects as diverse as caste and costume, Shakespeare and sadhus. Head of department and professor of sociology at the University of Bombay, Ghurye trained 40 PhD's in a 35-year teaching career, then trained another 16 PhD's in retirement. He founded the Indian Sociological Society in 1951 and remained its president for 15 years. Several of his students were later ISS presidents, and others served as the organization's secretaries or treasurers. Their books were as numerous as chilies in Kerala. And Ghurye himself wrote at least one truly great book: the monograph *Caste and Race in India* for C. K. Ogden's History of Civilization series, in which he joined authors such as W. H. R. Rivers, Lucien Febvre, V. Gordon Childe, and Marcel Granet. Published in 1932, the book—Ghurye's first—was a resounding success. By 1969 it had reached a fifth edition and almost doubled in size.

So extraordinary a career of course reflected an equally extraordinary character, and indeed the chapter titles of Ghurye's autobiographical memoir reveal a man who found and lived a destiny: "I Arrive"; "I Learn";

*Another review from 2049 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

"I Go to College"; "I Seek an Academic Career"; "I Run My Career"; "I Retire from Service-Career." After such an outline, it is no surprise that we hear the details not only of Ghurye's many scholarly successes, but also of his various intestinal difficulties and his many scholarly and bureaucratic contests. Ghurye's wife appears in the book mainly to show how enlightened were Ghurye's own views on things like spousal relations, caste naming, and birth control. One wonders what she thought about his informing readers as to the month of her menarche.

But the symphonic egoism of *I and Other Explorations* does not obscure Ghurye's utterly remarkable trajectory. Govind Sadashiv Ghurye was born in 1893 in Malvan, at the southern edge of what was then the Bombay Presidency of the British Empire in India. His birth family being in sudden decline, Ghurye was educated with the help of relations and connections. In this process, he quite literally followed his brilliant elder brother, whose education took him first to the nearby princely town of Kolhapur, then to Bombay, and then to teaching positions first in the Gujurati princely town of Junagarh, and later back in Bombay. In Junagarh the younger Ghurye took up serious study of Sanskrit, later becoming the top Sanskrit scholar of his class at the University of Bombay, taking First Class Honors and winning the Chancellor's Medal.

In 1919 the university proposed a traveling fellowship for the study of sociology. Since his Sanskrit thesis had involved the study of social institutions, Ghurye was intrigued. But the fellowship was under the control of the professor of sociology. Strangely enough, this was the celebrated Scottish city planner Patrick Geddes. Geddes had been a botany professor in Dundee for 31 years, most of which he had actually spent as a sociological activist in London. But in 1914, the opportunities of imperial town planning had brought him to India at the invitation of his old friend (and fellow Scot) Lord Pentland. Having lost both his son and his wife in 1917, Geddes decided to settle in India and therefore recreated at Bombay in 1919 the same arrangement he had long enjoyed at Dundee: part-year teaching coupled with an extensive national and international consulting practice.

For some reason, the aging Scottish visionary and the brilliant young Sanskritist found each other sympathetic, and Geddes duly sent Ghurye off to England. Despite his initial efforts, however, Ghurye could not stomach the recommended London PhD in Comtean social evolutionism under L. T. Hobhouse. He followed one of Geddes's other letters of introduction to A. C. Haddon, who in turn took him to W. H. R. Rivers, who not only became Ghurye's patron and sponsor at Cambridge but also arranged for two extensions of his Bombay fellowship. On Rivers's sudden death in 1922, Haddon took over and saw Ghurye through the PhD and his return to a further fellowship in Calcutta. Not surprisingly given this experience, Ghurye remained a lifelong Anglophile, to the discomfiture of his younger colleagues and students.

In 1924 Ghurye was appointed reader in sociology at Bombay (and

head of department, since Geddes's tenure had been judged unsuccessful). He finally became professor in 1934. In his 1973 autobiography, Ghurye's Bombay decades are largely a recitation of students and their theses, of bureaucratic contests won and lost, of famous visitors and their glowing testimonials. There are some acrid moments, to be sure. In an odd but characteristic aside, Ghurye tells with no small pride how he managed to deny a readership at Bombay to Srinivas in 1950–51, even though the latter was—by the time Ghurye was writing—the most famous sociologist in India and even though Ghurye's relation to Srinivas looked disturbingly like Geddes's relation to Ghurye. And even while revealing this scholarly pettiness, Ghurye shows its obverse vanity by lovingly lingering over the festschrift produced for him by K. M. Kapadia and other admiring students.

Ghurye retired in 1959, becoming even more productive in retirement. He supervised students until 1971 (age 78) but did not attend conferences or accept honors. In 1974, he refused to send biographical data to the Indian Council of Social Science Research because "those who do not know about my writings do not deserve to get replies from me." In 1978, he did not reply to a letter of congratulations from the prime minister because he found the format of the letter improper. Ghurye died in 1983, having published *The Burning Cauldron of North-East India*, his last book, in 1980, when he was 87.

Ghurye's extraordinary productivity (his bibliography lists 30 books) reflected his mode of production. He dictated his later work, and careful study has shown that his basic theoretical stances did not change throughout his career. He remained faithful to Rivers's diffusionism despite the parade of functionalism, structuralism, Marxism, and postcolonialism across the landscape of Indian sociology during his long life. *Caste and Race* is his best book, for it was written rather than dictated, and its argument is fresh and passionate in a young scholar's mind. Had Ghurye written nothing else, this book alone would have made him an important figure.

Caste and Race focuses principally on caste. The first two chapters identify the basic features of the caste system and analyze the nature of caste groups. These chapters are largely descriptive and consider caste as it was in the 1920s. They are quite frank about the fluctuating nature of caste and find the principal definienda of caste and subcaste in their constraint of social life and cultural patterns, but above all in their prescription of endogamy. Ghurye notes the very loose affiliation of caste with occupation, sect, and other forms of difference, but emphasizes the looseness rather than the affiliation.

The next two chapters follow the concept of caste through four periods: the Vedic period with its Vedic and Brahmanic texts; the post-Vedic period dominated by the Laws of the Aryas, the great epics, and the Buddhist writings; the period of the Dharmasastras, summed up in Manu at the outset and in the Vishnu Purana at the end; and the "modern" period, in

which these various texts recombined and flowered into a more systematic tradition. As this periodization makes clear, Ghurye was uniquely positioned to write about caste; few of his sociological successors would be prize-winning Sanskritists able to read these texts with fluency. Yet his command of Sanskrit inevitably correlated with and perhaps predisposed him to a particular theory of caste; for Ghurye, caste was fundamentally the product of underlying ethnic (he calls them racial, but I use the later term) differences that are deployed, scrambled, and rerationalized under conditions of continuing intercultural contact, assimilation, and conflict. By contrast, a pure functionalist might argue that caste in India as of the late 19th century had little historical depth. It could be a simple rationalization of occupational specialization in the then-present, a rationalization come somewhat adrift from occupation under the pressures of colonialism. But Ghurye's mastery of Sanskrit inevitably led him to focus on much deeper historical roots.

Ghurye argues that the classical writers developed the concepts that would later be bound into the (colonial) concept of caste principally through discussion of the four varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. Through this complex discussion was expressed and explored a basic theory of endogamous groups linked in a hierarchy of purity. But as Ghurye insists, the forces of intercultural contact, geographic mobility, occupational drift, religious change, and—above all—miscegenation continually blurred any endogamous groups that emerged. Then the principles of hierarchy, purity, and endogamy had to be redeployed to sharpen the boundaries again. This process eventually strewed the landscape with the castes (*jati*) and subcastes that so confused the British census enumerators in the late 19th century, when they decided to freeze-photograph the system and then interpret that snapshot within their new “theory of everything”—evolution.

By reconstructing ancient and historical societies from legal and religious texts, Ghurye followed a great sociological tradition. One of the two principal tributaries of sociology was the historical jurisprudence of scholars like Savigny, Gierke, Ihering, Maine, and Maitland. (Many forget that Max Weber's training was in law, not philosophy or history.) Yet the transition from jurisprudence to sociology saw a fundamental shift. The lawyers knew perfectly well that legal texts are in large part performative; they make what they say true by virtue of saying it. On this matter, Ghurye stands with that older legal tradition, for he recognizes throughout that the texts he reads are attempts to rationalize and order what has become chaotic and that these rationalizations were often made in support of particular Brahmanical interests. (And indeed Ghurye also relies considerably on the caste scholarship of the German Richard Fick, whose reliance on Pali texts reflects his suspicions of just those Brahmanical interests.)

By contrast, many 20th-century sociologists lost sight of the performative quality of social texts; their new reliance on “science” led them to

take texts at their word. It was therefore a great novelty to them when J. L. Austin rediscovered performativity at midcentury. Inevitably, the concept was applied by late 20th-century scholars to the colonial Indian Census, which in their eyes became the inventor and thereby enactor of a rigid caste system that, it was claimed, had never before existed. But Ghurye—in 1932—already recognizes that the British were only the latest in a long tradition of performative, rationalizing analysts of caste. Moreover, he also recognized that that rationalization had been grounded in a principle of performativity never previously studied: not property as in Maitland, nor individual purpose as in Ihering, nor family duty as in Qu Tongzu, but rather ritual purity.

Chapters 5 and 7 consider the relation of race and caste. Ghurye here jumps immediately into the polemic between Herbert Risley, a colonial administrator and census officer committed to “racial” theories of the origin of caste, and his predecessors Denzil Ibbetson and J. C. Nesfield, who inclined to an occupational theory. Using what were then cutting-edge methods (nasal indexes and correlational analysis), Ghurye shows that a strong race/caste correlation exists only in Hindustan, a fact he attributes to its location at the portal where the Aryan / Brahmanic peoples entered the subcontinent. Closeness to “ancestral” Aryan populations meant that Brahmanic endogamy could remain stronger in Hindustan, whereas in southern and eastern India, where contact had been longer and the “fissiparous” tendencies of intermarriage hence more dominant, caste no longer correlated with physical type. Thus was diffusionism coupled with a new view that caste endogamy was ideologically important but practically difficult. Intermarriage was perpetually creating new groups, which then had to be rationalized and systematized by Brahmanic intellectuals, even while the exigencies of material life—occupation, land-owning, trades—steadily pressed against any limited or fixed notion of an occupational rationalization, even for Brahmanical writers. Ghurye’s view of caste was thus inevitably dynamic and rejected the deep, almost primeval stability sought by—indeed assumed by—many of the racial and occupational theories.

Ghurye’s most striking chapters concern the current situation of caste. He is under no illusions about that system; he knows well that the current “reality” of caste is in large part a creation of the British census. In this insight, he anticipated later critical theorists by half a century. Indeed, it turns out that the British themselves were quite aware of the objectifying power of the census. Among the many British critics of caste-counting, Ghurye singles out L. Middleton, the Punjab census officer in 1921 who noted that many were refusing to give their caste, a refusal that Middleton took to show that Indians were abandoning caste altogether: “[occupational castes] have been largely manufactured and almost entirely preserved as separate castes by the British Government. . . . Government’s passion for labels and pigeon-holes has led to a crystallization of the caste system, which, except amongst the aristocratic castes, was really very

fluid under indigenous rule" (p. 160). Ironically, the British insistence on classification reflected in part a desire for data on which to base early forms of affirmative action (such as quota representation of lower castes in administrative bodies), thereby curing the problem that—at least according to Middleton, Ghurye, and others—the British were in part themselves creating. (By contrast, in the mainstream British view of the time, only meritocracy—not merely random social change and miscegenation—would obliterate caste boundaries.) Like many later analysts, Ghurye noted that one obvious result of the census was a proliferation of caste associations aiming to change their levels in the hierarchy: aboriginals seeking classification as Hindus, Sikhs worried about undercounting, Kolis claiming to be Koli Rajputs, and so on.

Ghurye's autobiography makes it clear that he disliked these caste associations intensely, but it is perhaps also possible that personal interest lay behind his expectation that caste would wither away unless there were continuous reinvigoration via the census, Brahmanic writing, or government intervention. In *Caste and Race* he nowhere reports for his readers his own caste, and even his autobiography mentions only that he avoided the new caste-advancement associations on grounds of principle. But by identifying those associations, he indirectly—but surely quite consciously—tells us that he was a Saraswat Brahmin, of the Bardeshkar subcaste (pp. 25, 64). So perhaps it is not surprising that he rejects the occasional British policy of affirmative action, arguing that the classic liberal policies of open schools and free competition would break down the walls of hierarchy faster than would quotas and targets.

Ghurye's vision of India's past is profoundly historical. In this it differs from the contemporary view of classical China in writers like Qu Tongzu, whose classical China is an eternal present occasionally ruffled by the rise and fall of dynasties. Yet underneath this foreground of change, Ghurye like all writers of his time sometimes assumes ur-groups whose relative purity and almost biological unity he takes largely for granted. In common with his peers, he denotes these as "races," although it is never quite clear what he means by that term. That, for example, those ur-groups were themselves produced by intercultural contact, or by an earlier and unknowable history—this he seems to ignore.

Indeed, Ghurye's work reminds us of the strange, almost hypothetical character of the race concept as it evolved under the dual pressures of political utilities on the one hand and knowledge transformation (especially in the sciences of evolution) on the other. In America, race meant one thing; in India, quite another; in the biology textbooks, yet a third. The meanings always included something about biology, and something about heritability and endurance, and usually something about visible difference and sociocultural patterns. But beyond that, there was little consistency. One wonders indeed if the peculiarly fixed character of definitions of race in the 20th century was not created by an inevitable pressure toward abstraction produced by such conflicting ideas, as well

as by the hegemony of the United States with its quite peculiar “one-drop” conception of race. Earlier conceptions of this combination (of biology, heritability, and cultural difference) were probably more flexible than the mass-produced “race” concept widely disseminated after the middle of the 19th century.

There is also a subtle temporal issue involved. At the heart of 20th-century race conceptions, as indeed of all things denoted in the West by the word “stratification,” lies the idea that something long-term and unchangeable determines something short-term and flexible. In India it was race determining caste status and hence possibly determining current socioeconomic rewards. In other cases it would be race determining income or gender determining occupational achievement. This temporal structure explains why age failed when it was proposed as a “dimension of stratification.” Age, to be sure, has large differential effects on the momentary rewards of life. But one decade’s dispossessed youth is the next decade’s middle-aged power broker, and one decade’s dominant power broker is the next decade’s aging has-been.

This temporal structure complements a similar, social structure of the stratification concept. The concept of stratification, as Dumont pointed out, involves a largely Western conception of the individual, and of the determination of the life chances of that individual by his or her location in some larger group with a particular structural position. The ideological project of Western liberalism was somehow to disengage the individual from that structural position. In a sense, then, to ask whether race determined caste was to ask a peculiarly Western question, within the peculiarly Western ideological framework of achievement (the short term and the individual) versus ascription (the long term and the social).

Later editions of *Caste and Race* would move toward that framework, so much so that Dumont would find the 1952 and subsequent editions of *Caste and Race* guilty of romanticizing a mythic past. But at heart Ghurye’s vision was not romantic, but historical. He believed that caste—whatever it actually is at any given time—is always the momentary outcome of a structured constellation of historical processes. His interest lay in the complexity of those processes. The tumults of Indian politics continually reshape how we understand Ghurye. But they cannot obscure the importance of his work. This is a text that confronts the central issues of social science.