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Conclusion: Caste and the Postcolonial Predicament

> Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.
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> —Karl Marx

Kancha Ilaiah begins his remarkable book entitled *Why I am Not a Hindu* by saying, "I was not born a Hindu for the simple reason that my parents did not know that they were Hindus." He goes on to make clear that this was not because his parents belonged to some other religious identity but rather because his "illiterate parents, who lived in a remote South Indian village, did not know that they belonged to any religion at all." Members of the Kuruma caste, breeders of sheep, his parents brought him up in a world in which Hinduism was clearly the province of the upper castes—Brahmins, Baniyas, Ksatriyas. "We knew nothing of Brahma, Vishnu or Eswara until we entered school. When we first heard about these figures they were as strange to us as Allah or Jehova or Jesus were."[1] According to Kancha Ilaiah, the cultural life of Hindus, determined in large part by protocols of hierarchy, ritual, and purity, steeped in beliefs that were seen as inaccessible and foreign, was not something he shared. Only in recent years, under the sway of a Hindu fundamentalist movement that has sought to recruit Dalits and other low-caste groups to a generic confessional idea of Hinduism, has he experienced any intimations of a possible connection. And yet, as a political activist and theorist, skeptical of a movement that seeks to build new conditions for the hegemony of an upper-caste Hindu chauvinism, he has written a book to reject the right of Hindus, and Hinduism, to claim him. Now, basing his autobiography and his political identity in his lower-caste origins, he champions caste mobilization as both a progressive political force and as antithetical to Hindu nationalism.

That caste might have nothing (or, rather, everything) to do with the idea of Hinduism as either a religion or a community is of course hardly a new thought, or condition, for Dalits across India. But the resistance to a new incorporative Hinduism that began with Ambedkar in the early years of this century reflects the changing claims of Hinduism itself during the last century. From the textual discovery of "Hinduism" in the eighteenth century, through the various institutional methods deployed by colonial rule throughout the

nineteenth century in which Hinduism both as doxa and as praxis was defined by an upper-caste elite in relationship to colonial and national contexts and imperatives, to the birth of a new postcolonial Hindu nationalism, the relationship of religion to society has undergone massive redefinition. Whereas those colonial Orientalists who, like Max Müller, argued for the distinction between the religious aspects of caste and its social manifestations had to resort to Vedic texts and interpretations, now Hindu nationalists who seek to submerge caste difference in religious unity echo these older arguments in new contexts. The intellectual genealogies are complicated by the changing nature of the categories of religion and society, even as it is clear that colonial history has produced the conditions for latter-day appropriation. Caste represented different kinds of life worlds and different kinds of threats in the nineteenth century, but the fact that the current resurgence of caste has sometimes occasioned a debate with the idea of Hinduism itself is surely rooted in the long history of debate about whether caste was civil or religious, or both.

In many current debates, Gandhi is credited with anticipating the problems of postcolonial secularism. Gandhi is correctly seen as the most eloquent and progressive spokesperson for an idea of religion that could not be separated from politics. Gandhi concluded his autobiography by writing that it was his devotion to truth that drew him into the field of politics, "and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."[2] For Gandhi, the idea of truth could be used to make other kinds of distinctions—between, for instance, good religion and bad. But it also allowed him to make what in other contexts might appear as new separations between religion and politics, as when he distinguished between caste as a system of social discrimination and *varnashramadharma* as a principle of value and order. In a famous speech given in Tanjore in 1927, Gandhi reiterated a position that had landed him in serious trouble in Madras throughout the decade of the twenties. "I still believe in *varnasharma dharma*. . . . *Varnashramadharma* is humility. Although I have said that all men and women are born equal, I do not wish therefore to suggest that qualities are not inherited, but on the contrary I believe that just as everyone inherits a particular form so does he inherit the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors, and to make this admission is to conserve one's energy." He went on to address the implications of his position for the debate in Madras Presidency over the non-Brahman movement.

> And if you accept what I have ventured to suggest to you, you will find that the solution of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin question also, in so far as it is concerned with the religious aspect, becomes very easy. As a non-Brahmin I would seek to purify Brahmanism in so far as a non-Brahmin can, but not to destroy it. I would dislodge the Brahmin from the arrogation of superiority or from places of profit.

> Immediately a Brahmin becomes a profiteering agency he ceases to be a Brahmin. But I would not touch his great learning wherever I see it. And whilst he may not claim superiority by reason of learning I myself must not withhold that meed of homage that learning, wherever it resides, always commands.[3]

Gandhi articulated here a position that was similar in many respects to those of earlier Hindu social reformers, Dayananda and Vivekenanda among them, even as he stretched the distinction between Brahmanism and social (or economic) privilege in order to claim an uncompromised commitment to equality. And yet despite Gandhi's careful effort to separate principle from practice, he angered E.V.R. and Ambedkar, among many others, precisely because his principles seemed to them irrevocably connected to the dominance of the upper castes in Indian social, political, and religious life. It also struck them as disingenuous, for they believed that Gandhi used these principles to attract multiple constituencies for whom his distinctions were hardly relevant.

Religion and politics could only be separated, or combined, once they were constituted in modern registers as discrete fields of belief and action. My argument throughout this book has been that the registers of modernity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India were colonial ones, which compromised both the promise of modernity and the possibilities of resistance to it. Gandhi might well have been responding in creative and compelling ways to the mutual inheritance of colonial Orientalist and anticolonial nationalist concerns about the denigration of Indian civilizational values, but he could hardly exempt himself and his words from the colonial contradictions that constituted both the threat and the limit of his formulations. Although I have suggested ways in which Gandhi must be read against the grain of caste, in particular through my treatment of E.V.R. and Ambedkar, I am also proposing here that Gandhi's critique of secular concerns about the reach of religion into politics was undermined both by the ambiguous relationship of caste (as a social and political fact) to religion and by the fundamentally ambiguous nature of Hinduism as a modern religious form. Even as caste could only be justified through an appeal to religious principle, Hinduism could only mobilize itself in political terms by constructing boundaries and making exclusions. Thus I argue not only that tradition was produced under the sign of colonial modernity but also that it was irrevocably tainted for political purposes precisely because of this colonial history.

Ashis Nandy has argued that Gandhi was an arch antisecularist because he "claimed that his religion was his politics and his politics was his religion."[4] Nandy, like T. N. Madan and a number of prominent Indian social scientists, has sought to recast Gandhi's position as one that was predicated neither on a modern style of cultural relativism nor on his efforts to mobilize political support for the struggle against colonialism. Madan has asked, for example, whether "men of religion such as Mahatma Gandhi would be our best teachers

on the proper relation between religion and politics—values and interests—underlining not only the possibilities of interreligious understanding, which is not the same as an emaciated notion of mutual tolerance or respect, but also opening out avenues of a spiritually justified limitation of the role of religious institutions and symbols in certain areas of contemporary life." In assuming an answer in the affirmative, he goes on to write, in near apocalyptic language, "The creeping process of secularization, however, slowly erodes the ground on which such men might stand." And Nandy sees Gandhi's religious tolerance as rooted in his "anti-secularism, which in turn came from his unconditional rejection of modernity."[5] Nandy states his case clearly and powerfully: "Religious tolerance outside the bounds of secularism is exactly what it says it is. It not only means tolerance of religions but also a tolerance that is religious. It therefore squarely locates itself in traditions, outside the ideological grid of modernity." Nandy goes on to note that traditional Hinduism (or, rather, *sanatan dharma*) was the source of Gandhi's religious tolerance. Although I would hardly argue against Nandy's, or Madan's, plea for religious tolerance, let alone criticize either for suggesting that tolerance be made into a religious value, I fear that this position is not merely unhistorical but also out of step with contemporary critiques of Gandhi by those who understood his message in very different ways. To dismiss Gandhi's position as only politically manipulative is no doubt wrong. But to argue that Gandhi's sense of the relationship between religion and politics was not situated in complex relation to colonial modes of knowledge, the formulations of Hindu social reformers, and the contingencies of political struggle and support is disingenuous, as well. Leaving aside his polemical style, Nandy fails to grapple with the extent to which the kind of antisecularism he espouses is implicated in the same problematic contradictions as the secularism he so passionately attacks. If Nandy is justifiably concerned by the misuses of Gandhi made by those who controlled Indian statecraft in the years of Nehruvian secularism, surely he must recognize how his reading of Gandhi could be used to justify the kinds of religious tolerance—read intoleration—that are promulgated by Hindu nationalists in more recent times, as well.

Ambedkar and E.V.R. found it impossible to separate Gandhi's defense of religion from his defense of caste, and as a result made extreme attacks on both caste and religion, if in rather different ways. When their critiques, and lives, are read into Gandhi's own extraordinary political and intellectual struggle, it is possible to appreciate the contradictory bequest of colonial rule for contemporary social and political life, even as it is necessary to recognize that all of these struggles must be understood as part of the history of anticolonial nationalism in India. If I have suggested that an uncomplicated resort to tradition can no longer be seen as either innocent or authentic, I have also tried to suggest that the recognition of the power of modernity need not preclude the celebra-

tion and deployment of contradiction. Caste in its present form(s) may be the precipitate of a tragic history, but it is now, for better and for worse, a fundamental component of political struggles that seek to redeem that same tragic past. But that is only because caste has been part of the same history that has transformed the terms both of the traditional and of the modern in the postcolonial world in which we live today. New traditions will continue to be invented, even as tradition as an idea—sometimes an inspiration and other times a phantasm—will hardly yield its power to increasingly stale and scary visions of the modern. But the purpose of this kind of postcolonial critique is to suggest that even as tradition has never been like this before, it will, perforce, continue to be rooted in the very history that it seeks to precede or transcend. And the purpose of bringing Ambedkar and E.V.R. into conversation with Gandhi is in part to suggest that nationalist ideology can only move beyond the stifling conditions of colonial production by reclaiming the histories of caste mobilization, religious critique, and political struggle that these profoundly national figures represent.

There is no end to history. And now, at the dawn of the new millennium, it returns with almost farcical vengeance in the form of the census. After a decade that began with the convulsions surrounding the implementation of the Mandal Report, it has been proposed that caste be reintroduced as an enumerative category in the 2001 census. A recent symposium at the Institute for Economic Growth in Delhi brought together distinguished social scientists to debate the issue. The conveners of the symposium began their summary article by noting that "The controversy around the proposal to reintroduce caste returns in the Census of 2001 provides yet another instance of our deep-seated ambivalence towards the most distinctive institution of Indian society. As liberal-modern intellectuals and citizens, we would like to reject caste altogether, to consign it to the dustbin of history. But we are also forced to acknowledge its continued relevance as a contemporary form of discrimination and inequality, and therefore also as an axis for mobilisation or avenue for advancement."[6] The article goes on to adduce more reasons for ambivalence, including a suspicion of the state's intentions in making this move, and uncertainty about the role of caste in an age of liberalization and globalization. Among the most compelling arguments in favor of reintroducing caste in the census are the sense that caste is as important a variable in contemporary Indian society as language, religion, or region, that the inclusion of caste in the census will facilitate the social scientific study of changes in the morphology of the system as a whole, and that such a move is necessary so long as recent legislation mandating various types of legislation for the backward castes is on the books. Among the arguments against the use of caste are the belief that the inclusion of caste would intensify divisive caste identities and could lead to violence, that the use of caste would be abhorrent given the constitutional vision of a

casteless society, that given the nature of caste the data would be faulty and difficult to collect, and that in the end such a policy would continue British colonial policies of "divide and rule" through caste.

Has colonial tragedy now returned as postcolonial farce? When critiques of colonialism can be used to argue against what many commentators agree are progressive, if flawed, measures to pursue a constitutional commitment to social and economic equality, is it time to put historical concerns with the colonial past back on the shelf of academic historiography? The purpose behind a postcolonial historiography of colonialism is to come to terms with the weight of the colonial past without turning our backs on that past. This must entail yielding neither to the misuses of the colonial critique nor to the argument that colonialism did not, in the end, matter. Many historians, as I demonstrate in the Coda to this book, now suggest that an emphasis on colonialism effaces both the ancient reality of India and the contemporary agency of Indians, as if the bad faith—and tragic fate—of colonial history might now be simply wished away. Alas, colonialism not merely happened, it continues to haunt the postcolonial nation. That colonial history can now be used to undermine progressive politics, even as that same history produced the conditions for a nationalist ideology based on social and religious inequality as well as prejudice, is only the most recent illustration of the powerful, and contradictory, legacy of the colonial interlude in India. If caste returns as a critical enumerative category for the Indian state in the new millennium, it both carries the enormous contradictions of this legacy and points to new possibilities for social transformation and political citizenship. Caste, in these terms, is neither tragedy nor farce, but history itself.