How many "castes" are there?

Four or 10,000+?

What is "caste"?

- a religious phenomenon / religio-ritual ideology?

- a socio-psychological construct?

- a system of "racial" / social hierarchies / segregation / stratification?

- an "ethnic", endogamous identity / ethnicity or ethnic group?

- division of labour / a class system / a hereditary occupational guild system?

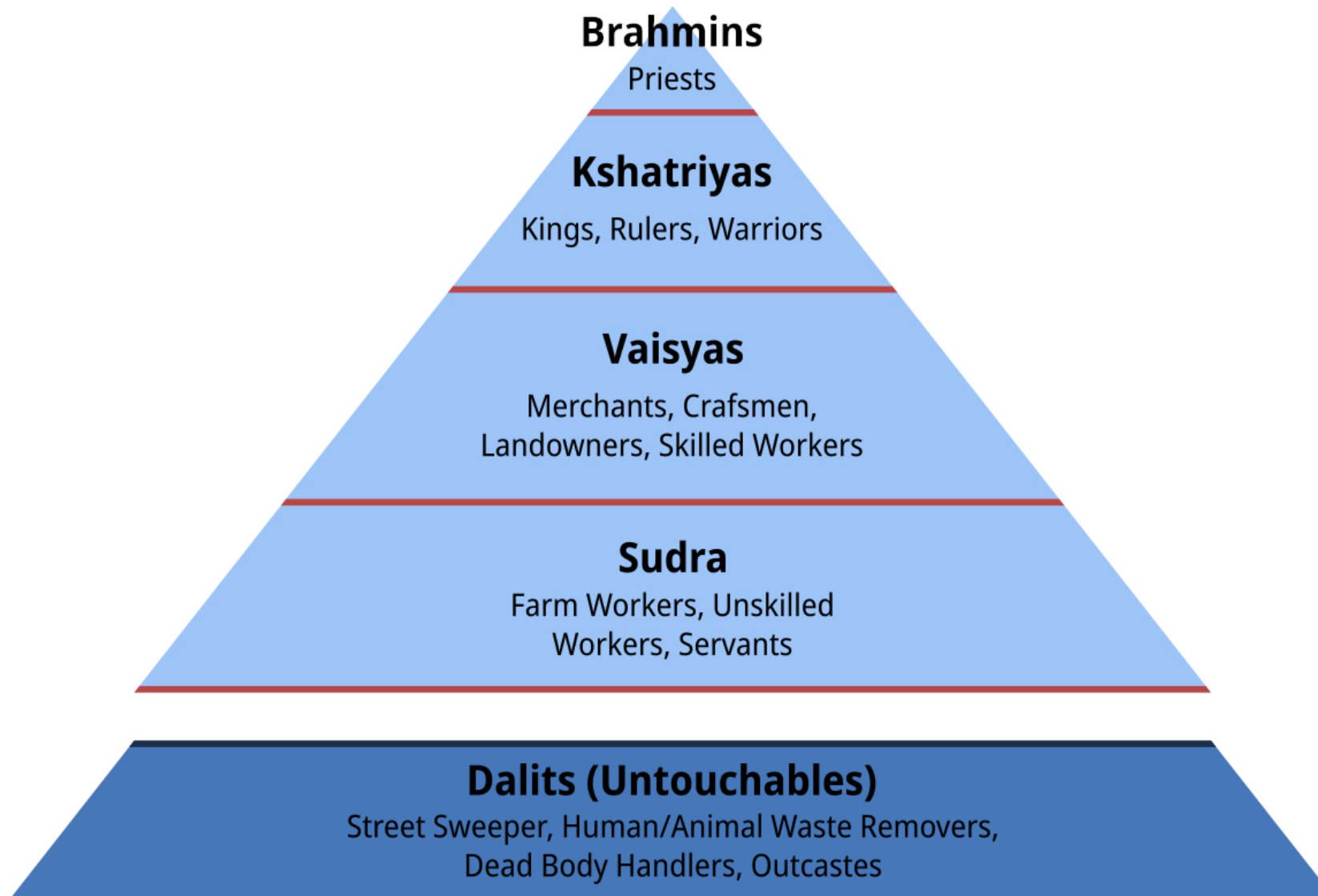- an oppressive social-economic order?

- all of the above?

Definitions

- **no universally accepted definition of "caste"**

G. S. Ghurye in 1932:

"[W]e do not possess a real general definition of caste. It appears to me that any attempt at definition is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon. On the other hand, much literature on the subject is marred by lack of precision about the use of the term."

Indian Caste System

Brahmins
Priests

Kshatriyas
Kings, Rulers, Warriors

Vaisyas
Merchants, Crafsmen,
Landowners, Skilled Workers

Sudra
Farm Workers, Unskilled
Workers, Servants

Dalits (Untouchables)
Street Sweeper, Human/Animal Waste Removers,
Dead Body Handlers, Outcastes

Varṇas

- the four broad social classes outlined in Vedic and Dharmashāstra texts

- Brāhmaṇa (priests, teachers, scholars); Kṣatriya (warriors, kings, administrators); Vaiśya (merchants, landholders, artisans); Śūdra (servants, laborers)

- Origin: born from the cosmic Purusha (e.g. Brāhmaṇas from the mouth)Textual sanction: Ṛg-Veda and Manusmṛti codify duties (dharma) for each varṇa.Function:Prescribe ideal duties (varṇa-dharma), education (brahmacarya), rites, and life-stages (āśramas).Serve as a normative, pan-Indian schema — more theoretical than empirical. Flexibility: In principle, fixed by birth and patrilineal descent.

- mythological and philosophical debates allowed rare "switching" (e.g. sages born into Kṣatriya families)

Jātis

- thousands of endogamous, localized social groups – often translated simply as "castes"

- originally occupational (weavers, potters, blacksmiths, etc.), tribal affiliation, or region; each jati has its own customs (ācāra), worship practices, and hierarchy

- regulate marriage (endogamy), food-sharing (commensality), and professional guilds; provide social security by mutual aid, dispute-resolution, and communal identity

- fairly rigid today but historically more fluid → new jātis emerged, split, or changed status; sanskritization: lower jatis adopting upper-caste norms to climb the hierarchy

- Each jati in practice maps onto one of the four varnas (or sometimes "outside" the varṇa system altogether, e.g. Dalit communities)
- Legitimation:
  - ➤ varṇa theory provides religious sanction
  - ➤ jati provides the lived, day-to-day social structure
- Change over time:
  - ➤ varṇic categories remain stable in texts
  - ➤ jatis have proliferated, split, and re-ranked across regions and history

➤ Varṇas are the broad, scripturally defined "ideal" classes

➤ Jātis are the concrete, localized communities through which most people have historically lived out caste in everyday life

The British Raj and the Caste System

- **"freezing" / "crystallization"** of castes for **"administrative rigidity"** (Western-style bureaucratic systematization)
  - ➢ British census exercise **"more telling of the administrative needs of the British than of the social reality for the people of British India"** according to sociologist Michael Mann

- starting with the 1871 census (which included "caste", "religion", "profession" and "age" in the data), the British compulsorily listed, named, and ranked **jātis**, insisting on **a single "correct" designation per group**

- the argument then is that **this administrative imperative and the accompanying ethnographic reports froze fluid identities into rigid categories**

Nicholas Dirks – The "Modern Phenomenon" Thesis

- "Indian caste as we know it today is a 'modern phenomenon'" that was "fundamentally transformed by British colonial rule".

- *Castes of Mind* demonstrates how colonialism was both **"enabled by conquest"** and produced through **"cultural technologies of rule"**

- the British created an "ethnographic state" that used **caste classification as a primary mechanism of administrative control**

- **British census official Herbert Risley later admitted:**

➤ **"We pigeon-holed everyone by castes and if we could not find a true caste for them labeled them with the name of a hereditary occupation […] we are largely responsible for the [caste] system which we deplore."**

The Tribes *and* Castes *of* Bengal

by
Herbert Hope Risley
INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE, COMPANION OF THE INDIAN EMPIRE,
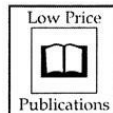OFFICER D'ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE
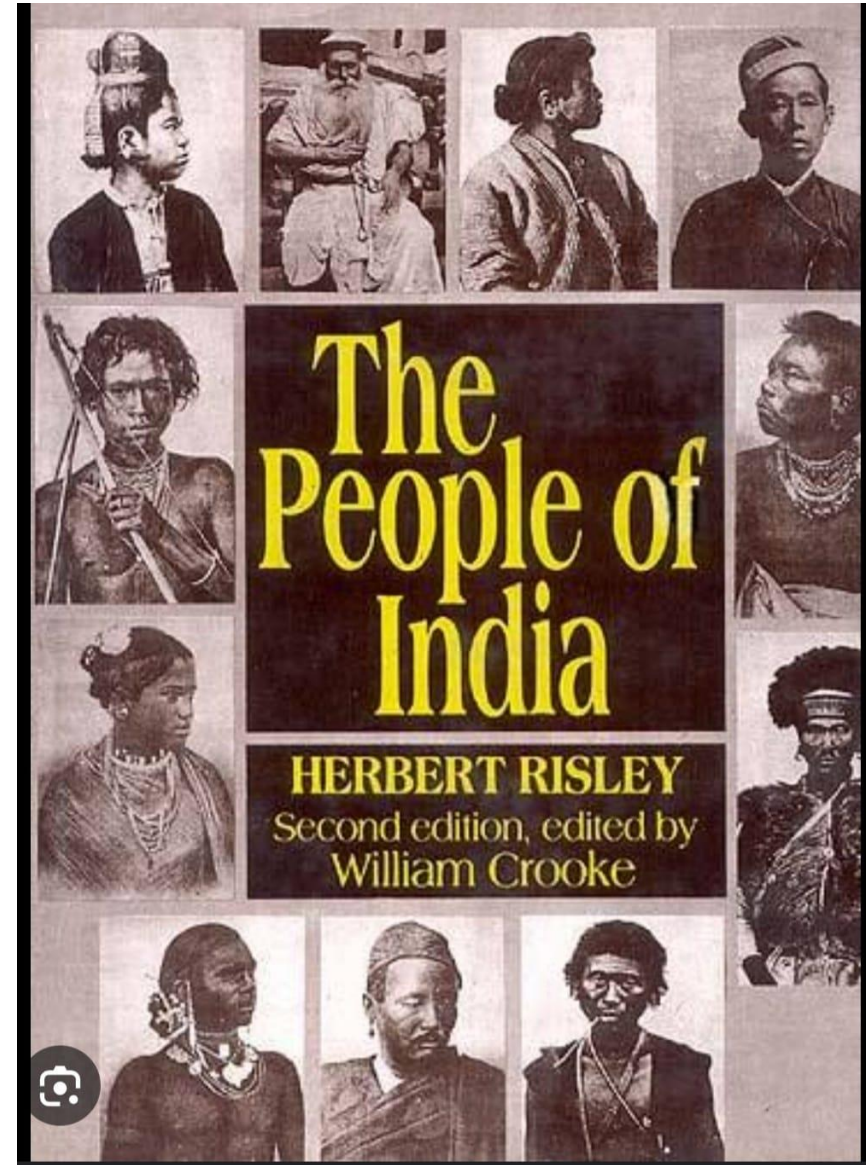
ETHNOGRAPHIC GLOSSARY

Vol. 1
(In Two Volumes)

τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν ; πόθι τοι πόλις ἠδὲ τοκῆες ;
ODYSSEY i, 170.

- by 1931, census commissioner J.H. Hutton recommended abandoning caste data collection entirely, as his predecessors had "failed miserably" due to numerous anomalies and inconsistencies
  - British officials complained that people would **confuse caste with religion, region, or occupation**, demonstrating how artificial these rigid categories were to local populations
- legal and economic institutionalization
  - caste distinctions embedded into governance structure through discriminatory legislation
  - laws such as the Land Alienation Act (1900) and Punjab Pre-Emption Act (1913) legally restricted land ownership to specific census-determined castes, creating "consequent caste barriers" and preventing economic mobility
- administrative jobs and senior appointments were granted exclusively to upper castes between 1860 and 1920
  - caste-based employment discrimination
- "Criminal Tribes" (Criminal Tribes Act in 1871) branding entire communities as hereditary criminals without substantive evidence
  - "tribes" instead of "castes" to evoke "qualities of wildness and savagery", demonstrating how colonial administrators manipulated social categories for control purposes
  - systematic legal subjugation "stigmatized, ostracized and impoverished many so-called lower-caste and tribal communities"

Gandhi vs. Ambedkar

Gandhi:

- believed in the **varna system**, representing **"the genius of Indian society"** with its **"wonderful power of organization"**

- supported **hereditary occupation** – **"the soul of the caste system"** and **an "eternal principle"**, changing it would "create disorder"

- advocated **reform (not abolition)** by eliminating hierarchy between castes while maintaining the four-varna structure, all castes should be considered equal

- focused on **untouchability as** a separate issue – **an "erroneous religious and cultural practice" that could be reformed without dismantling the caste system itself**

- Gandhi renamed untouchables as **"Harijans"** (children of God) and promoted "self-purification" through symbolic gestures

- **temple entry movement** – he championed temple entry as a way to integrate untouchables into Hindu society, viewing it as essential for Hindu unity

- opposed separate electorates – believing it would "balkanize" India

- idealized **"village republics"** and believed in returning to a "mythical Indian past" where people followed traditional occupations without competition

Ambedkar:

- **annihilation of caste** – the **caste system a "chamber of horrors"** and argued for its total destruction, including rejection of Hindu scriptures

- **caste as division of labourers** – caste not just as division of labour but as "division of labourers" creating an "ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt"

- "I will not die a Hindu" and **converted to Buddhism**, viewing Hinduism as inherently incompatible with equality

- the real violence of caste was "denial of entitlement, land, wealth, knowledge, and equal opportunity"

- viewed temple entry movement as "Hinduizing and Brahminizing Untouchables", drawing them further into their own humiliation

- "[T]he outcaste is a bye-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes."

- advocated for separate political representation: "Nobody can remove your grievances as well as you can and you cannot remove them unless you get political power in your hands."

- traditional Indian villages as "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism" → urban modernization

- as architect of the Indian Constitution, he embedded legal protections for marginalized communities

"Backwardness"

- under British rule, the 1931 census labelled communities "backward" if they had low literacy, poor health, or occupied low-status jobs

- post-Independence, the framers of the Constitution adopted similar language in Article 15(4) and Article 16(4) to empower Parliament to make "special provisions for advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes"

- The Mandal Commission (1979–84) concretized "backward" as measurable social and educational indicators (landlessness, low school-completion rates, poor representation in public services) and identified roughly 3,000 communities to recommend for reservation

- **Scheduled Castes (SC)**
  - ➤ historically "untouchable" communities subjected to extreme social exclusion under the old caste hierarchy (often referred to collectively as "Dalits")
  - ➤ listed in Schedule I of the Constitution; parliament may amend the Schedule to add or remove communities; reserved seats in Parliament, State Assemblies, local bodies; minimum 15% of government jobs and 15% of seats in publicly funded educational institutions; special legal safeguards under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989

- **Scheduled Tribes (ST)**
  - ➤ indigenous ("Adivasi") communities often living in remote, forested or hilly regions, with distinct languages, cultures and traditional governance systems; also listed in Schedule I of the Constitution alongside SCs; reserved seats (7.5% in government jobs and 7.5% in educational institutions); land-rights protection under various state laws; special development programs (e.g., Tribal Sub-Plan)

- **Other Backward Classes (OBC)**
  - ➤ castes and communities considered "socially and educationally backward", but not covered under SC or ST; includes many artisanal, agricultural and trading groups; identified by a National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) and listed in a separate Schedule (often called the "Central List of OBCs"); states maintain their own lists as well; 27% reservation in central government jobs and in centrally funded higher-education institutions; "Creamy layer" exclusion: the wealthier/educated among OBCs are barred from availing of reservations to ensure benefits reach the truly disadvantaged

Cultural Studies Frameworks for Understanding the Caste System in India

1. Karl Marx – Class Analysis & Division of Labour
   - Caste as Division of Labour: Hereditary occupational stratification, intersection of economic and caste hierarchies, caste serves ruling class interests by maintaining stable, stratified workforce, revolutionary change requires transformation of economic base

2. Antonio Gramsci – Cultural Hegemony
   - Cultural, ideological, and moral leadership exercised by dominant groups that secures consent from subordinate groups, upper castes maintain dominance by controlling religious and cultural narratives, making caste hierarchy appear natural and divinely ordained, caste persists through consent and internalization, not just coercion

3. Louis Althusser – Interpellation & Ideological State Apparatuses
   - Interpellation: How individuals are "hailed" by ideology to recognize themselves as subjects, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) Institutions like schools, media, religion that shape identity

4. Pierre Bourdieu - Habitus & Cultural Capital
   - Habitus: Deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through life experiences
   - Cultural Capital: Embodied, institutionalized, and objectified forms of cultural knowledge and credentials

5. Subaltern Studies Collective Approach)

➢ Subaltern Agency: Foregrounding voices and agency of marginalized groups, challenging elite centric histories, focus on Dalit, Adivasi, and other oppressed groups' resistance strategies, reconstruction of history "from below"

6. Michel Foucault - Power/Knowledge & Discipline

➢ Power/Knowledge: Knowledge shapes and is shaped by power relations

➢ Disciplinary Power: Institutions regulate bodies and behaviors to produce conformity

➢ Biopower: Techniques for managing populations (marriage, sexuality, reproduction)

➢ Governmentality: How authorities shape conduct of individuals and groups

Dominant castes control religious, educational, legal discourses, institutions produce "docile bodies" conforming to caste norms, power operates through everyday practices, not just overt force