

An Inexplicable Marvel: Representations of Caste in the Works of Emily Eden and Charlotte Canning

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Abstract:

The 18th century presented a great churning in Indian society, throwing away many new configurations of the caste system. Caste also became a standardized and regular feature of the Indian society and achieved new complexity under the British rule. The British consolidated and theorized many of the amorphous implications of caste system and brought it to a more tangible concretized form. In this paper, European responses to the Indian caste system would be studied system and ambivalent aspects of European responses to the Indian society would be brought out. In undertaking such a project, I aim to read the responses of European female narratives as insightful accounts into the Indian system. This paper aims to bring out European observations of a system of caste under formation in the collection of letters and memoirs of Emily Eden and Charlotte Canning.

Keywords: Caste, Nineteenth century, Memsahib, India, Empire

The notion of caste in 19th century India resists a clear theorization. These instabilities were further expedited by the tectonic movements of societal patterns of the preceding century. A casual read through books like *The New Cambridge History of India* would testify to the fact. The 18th century saw the dissolution of the Mughal authority over India and an ascendancy of the British power. The centralized Mughal machinery in place for a century slowly dissolved leading to new social formations and class structures. There was also the emergence of the mixed classes due to the inbreeding between the Europeans and indigenous population which occupied a marginal zone in the entire caste ladder. There was also an inherent epistemological anxiety in accommodating the new White overlords into their traditional *Yavana* identity. The problem is further worsened by the different “class conflicts” in the Post-Mughal period which destabilized the traditional caste hierarchies and raises new ones. Therefore, we will see that the 19th century had inherited all these underlying tensions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into all these complexities in detail and I shall touch upon them as when necessary. But my primary purpose in this paper is to record select European responses to caste system in India in 19th century. The aspects that I hope to cover in this paper would be the following- primarily I would show how the machinery of caste helped the “Planetary Consciousness” (a phrase popularized by Mary Louis Pratt in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*) of the Europeans of 18th and 19th century and imposed a form of coherent European order on the native population. I would also like to record private and intimate European feminine responses to caste as opposed to the male authoritative responses embodied in the official literature of the time. Such a response would not only help to get a fuller picture of the caste relations in India but also be a much more intimate portrayal of caste relations beyond academic theorizing. For the purpose of my study I would like to look at Emily Eden’s *Up the Country* (1867) which narrates her experiences in India when she accompanied her brother Lord Auckland,

Governor-General of India (1836-42). I would also like to look at the collected letters of Charlotte Canning to her family collected in the book *The Story of Two Noble Lives* (1893) by Augustus J.C. Hare. Charlotte Canning was the wife of Lord Canning, the last Governor-General of British India (1856-57) under East India Company and its first Viceroy under the British crown (1857-62). From both these accounts, I hope to be able to cover an early Victorian to mid-Victorian era and European feminine responses representative of those times.

British reaction to caste throughout the 19th century has been conflicting and evolving. Nicholas B. Dirks points to the Evangelical-Orientalist debate surrounding castes in the first phase of the British Empire. But none of them succeeded in pushing their agendas because “by 1858 there was nevertheless general recognition that caste was the foundational fact of Indian society, fundamental both to Hinduism (as Hinduism was to it) and to the Indian subcontinent as a civilizational region.” (Dirks 41) Caste stopped being an issue with the Empire after 1857 and it was only a subject of curiosity rather than reform. There was also a debate between the theoretical and practical ideas regarding caste. Dirk quotes a passage by Max Muller to highlight this ambivalence. “Now, if we ask the Hindus whether their laws of caste are part of their religion, some will answer that they are, others that they are not.” (Quoted in Dirks 39) It should also be taken into account that with the progress of 19th century, the caste equations started changing and to quote Rev. M.A. Sherring’s work *Hindu Tribes and Castes* (1872), “caste as now existing was totally unknown to the Hindu race on first entering into India.” (Quoted in Dirks 47) The situation was complicated by the reconfiguration of the castes in the 18-19th century and also by the presence of the Europeans (Christians) and various half-castes, a phenomenon which was new in India. Sherring also writes that the caste was a design of the Brahmins to perpetuate their own domination. (Dirks 47) Brahmins were considered the fount of Orthodoxy.

Caste relations for these Mem Sahibs (women of European origin residing in India) must have been a practical and sensitive issue to deal with. It would also be different from their male counterparts, to whom caste would have a more theoretical and official import. For these women caste would be more immediate and would concern their daily activities. Caste would be an added hurdle in managing households that they were expected to manage efficiently. They would be typically surrounded by Indian servants who would make up the bulk of their household. Emily Eden writes in her book *Up the Country* how official travel would be made taking into account the caste rituals of the servants like allotting time for Hindu staff to get offshore and cook their food separately from Christians and Muslims (42). One immediate task would be to figure out the complicated caste equations that would pervade in the households and the tricky rituals of contact that would go face to face with it. One instance of the acceptance of caste would lie in Emily Eden’s depiction of the ordeal of her faithful Rosina. In the absence of her utensils, Rosina, “can only eat certain things and they must be cooked in a brass pot called ‘a lotah’”. (95) Lady Canning notes in her letter after arriving to Government House, Kolkata, that “... [she] has insisted on having my bed made and swept by a woman, and one has been got but she is of quite low caste, and I have not got an ayah.” (70) The implication of the phenomenon is two-fold. Firstly, she seems to have incorporated the prejudice of casteism of her subordinates. The fact that her servant would double as her ayah makes her uncomfortable. Somehow, the woman’s caste makes her less qualified to be the servant of aristocratic women. Emily Eden however, is more accommodating. Her faithful maid Rosina, a “Muhamedan” is not a subject of prejudice to her mistress. Emily Eden writes in her *Up the Country* that provisions were made to allow the Hindu servants to deboard and cook their meal. Miss Eden is perceptive in noting the differences between Hindu and Muslim women as it “gives [the readers] an insight into the manners and customs of the east.” If one thinks of this arising out of

what Mary Louise Pratt calls “Planetary Consciousness” one would perhaps find a motive behind the close ways these accounts depict caste and its minor intricacies.

However, the attitude to caste is not constant, instead it is highly dualistic. All these women reveal a paradoxical relationship with the Brahminism. Charlotte Canning calls Benares “troublesome” because it has “the most fanatical Brahmins and Hindoos.” (213) the usage seems to be interchangeable in her vocabulary. To the British, the Brahmins represented the best and the worst of their Indian subjects. It was a general anthropological contention that Aryans were descended from the Aryans and thus represented a tenuous link with Europe. On the other hand, the Brahmins were also the nucleus of Orthodoxy and conservatism. She points out that it was “a Brahmin” who tried to bring the Aligarh Regiment to Mutiny. (193) Here, Brahminism is treated as a kind of resistance to the empire building project. The lower castes however presented another baffling problem. There is also an amount of subversion in the Hindu festivals which have divested with the need for priests like Charak. Lady Canning notes with relish the ire of Brahmins towards such festivals. The British attitude to casteism must be something like “an enemy’s enemy is your friend.” Lower castes were therefore seen as natural allies against the grip of Brahmins. It was the lower castes which were most responsive to the Evangelical attempts of the Empire. Therefore, there is almost a laudatory reference to lower caste converts during her visit to the Bishop’s College,

... ryots who were converted have risen in position and are now in much better station from good character and steady perseverance, and some Brahmins were heard to confess that these people, of very inferior caste, were after all not a different species from themselves. (116)

But, “... converts are usually of very low caste, but even those generally rise in some degrees after they are converted. Those of higher caste and class suffer in the slightest degree by conversion...” (445). Here, she seems to accept the caste as a marker of humanity and posits Christianity as an agency for annihilating caste. The caste and class of the covert seems to matter despite Christianity recognizing no caste barriers. She goes on to talk about a Brahmin convert whom she calls “Banergra” or Banarjee, (who beyond doubt is Rev. K.M. Banerjee) “...as the only native besides Prince Gholam to have the honor to dine in the Government House.”(323). If we look briefly into the life of Rev. Banerjee in *Banglapedia* we can easily infer that he is one of the prominent high caste converts besides many such converts from the lower caste. Same goes for the reference to a converted “Tajore” or Tagore, i.e. Gyanendramohan Tagore, the first Indian to be called at the Bar. The privilege extended to him only supports the fact despite condemning Brahminism, she ends up vouching for it. One high caste convert seems to be more glorious than many other low caste ones as we note again and again in her journal. At one point, she seems to release the futility of conversion where she says that the converts, “...can have nothing to at all to do with caste again, but the fact of one having been a Brahmin is never forgotten, and gives influence.” (313)

The relationship between the Great Indian Mutiny and caste relationships is a topic that has been much written about. I will therefore not delve into the traditional historical scholarship surrounding the Mutiny and caste. However, I would like to select portions from Lady Canning’s letters and journals during the time of Mutiny to perhaps give a picture of time. She particularly refers to the bad press that the Cannings were receiving

I was told a story of a man up-country asking Mr. Money’s son if he knew the new Lord Sahib. The man answered that every Lord Sahib came to do something that this Lord Sahib has come to convert them all. This wonderful notion prevails far and wide, and we have not a guess how it has arisen but it is generally rife among natives in the bazaars, and we have heard of it for about three months. (198)

Already in her accounts, we find the discourses of religious policy after Mutiny were emerging and it can be concluded that a section of the British populace were dissatisfied with the zeal by which Evangelists were carrying out the cause of conversion. In another statement, we notice that she says “... that conversion *should not be bribed for*.(emphasis mine) To make mosques into churches, some of my English letters suggest, would arm the Mussulman population against us in a religious war.” (446)

As we would see, this reaction would be standardized as an official apology for the Empire in the coming decades. Therefore, it is perhaps necessary to read the public and the private accounts of the Raj in a closer proximity to unravel a more layered and complex historiography of casteism in India

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