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FROM ASCETICS TO BIGOTS: ON THE USE OF GREEK SOURCES TO PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF THE CASTE SYSTEM IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Ancient Greek writers wrote for several centuries about “Indian philosophers”, also referred to as Gymnosophists and Brachmanes. Scholars studying India today argue that these thinkers were Brahmins and other Indian ascetics. They further assert that Greek writings on India and the descriptions they provide of these philosophers and their social contexts bear witness to the existence of the caste system, its properties, and its functioning. However, an examination of the Greek texts, even in their 19th-century translations, would call this reading into question. The ancient scholars do not talk about the caste system familiar in mainstream sociology today. If so, how and when did the view that the Greeks discussed the Indian caste system emerge? For an answer, we need to go back to how European writings depicted the Brahmins over a millennium. This history is filled with many intriguing developments. Until around the 16th century, the contemporary Brahmins were seen as the descendants of the ancient Gymnosophists. Soon, however, under the influence of the anti-clerical views of the Christian Reformation, Europeans began to differentiate between the ancient and contemporary Brahmins. They lauded the former for their austere lives and condemned the latter as immoral bigots. As the story of the degeneration of Hinduism and Indian civilisation emerged in the 17th century, scholars began looking for the roots of this degeneration in India’s ancient past. However, in the absence of a unified and dominant narrative of the caste system as we understand it today, no link between the Greek descriptions of India and the Indian “caste system” was posited at this time. As the story of the caste system crystallised in the 18th and 19th centuries and Buddhism was discovered, scholars began to press the ancient Greeks into the service of providing witness to the existence of the caste system.

Keywords: Ancient Greeks; Brachmanes; Brahmins; Caste System; Gymnosophists; Hinduism; India

Introduction

In the writings of several important Greek (or more specifically, Hellenistic) writers, beginning from Cleitarchus (4th century BCE) through Strabo and Pliny (1st century CE) to Gaius Julius Solinus (3rd century), there are descriptions of certain “Indian philosophers”, primarily known as gymnosophists and Brachmanes. Among other things, the descriptions reflect their lifestyle and some aspects of the society of the time. Scholars who have written over the past three centuries about the history of the Indian caste system have generally agreed that the “philosophers” whom the Greek writers describe were “obviously ... the Brahmins” [Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 62], along with other groups of Indian sages such as Jains and Buddhists. “Megasthenes’s philosophers correspond to

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the brahmins”, declares Witzel [Witzel 2006, 487]. In other words, the term “philosophers” here refers “to what we would call the religious identities of Vedic Brahmanism and Shramanism” [Thapar 2002, 190–191]. In Greek accounts of these philosophers, social scientists have found compelling evidence for the Indian caste system, elucidating its “salient features” [Frazer 1898, 181], “peculiar features” [Ambedkar 2014, 130], and “essential features” [Arora 1991, 326]. The scholars have also identified the key properties that Greek authors write about. Among these is the “endogamous” nature of the caste system, which prevented its members from “chang[ing their] ... occupation or profession” [Cohn 2007, 4] and “restricted the[ir] choice of a spouse” [Srinivas et al. 1959, 131]. However, the system provided “exceptions for Brahmins” from these restrictions [Lubin 2013, 31]. In sum, as a recent scholar puts it categorically, Greek authors tell us that “[i]nter-marriage between the castes was prohibited as was the switching from one’s birthright caste into any other” [Vassiliades 2000, 53]. Scholars point to Megasthenes as the primary Greek author who offers such descriptions. He listed “seven castes” and made “unqualified statements” about “the formation of the caste system and its supporting ‘ideology’” [Habib 2002, 169]. That is, Megasthenes’ work informs that individuals “could enter only occupations within their own caste and were forbidden to marry outside caste lines” in India [Yamazaki 1997, 8].

This essay will demonstrate that contrary to what experts believe, a close reading of Greek texts – even in their 19th-century translations – reveals that they do not describe the so-called caste system. If true, this claim will raise additional questions. When Greek writers talk about Indian philosophers, their privileges, and their lifestyle, what precisely are they talking about? Answering this question requires two things: expertise in Greek language and culture, which falls outside the scope of this article, and some clearing of the deadwood. This article will undertake the latter task by raising another important question: How and when did the perception that Greek texts discuss the caste system come about?

Situating the Problem

Scholars do not contend that the Greek accounts of India give a precise account of the caste system. They labour hard to uncover the evidence of the caste system in the Greek texts. For instance, consider the following.

“For a society to become a caste-based society there have to be three preconditions: the society must register social disparities; there has to be unequal access of various groups within that society to economic resources; inequalities should be legitimized through a theoretically irreversible hierarchy and the imposition of the hierarchy claim to be based on a super-natural authority. ... The first two features would be present in a minimal way in many societies. These would be essential characteristics of a jati and might even occur in a lesser form in some clan organizations. The ideological factor derives from varna and is characteristic of Hindu society” [Thapar 2002, 63–64].

Romila Thapar suggests that “social disparities” and quantitative inequality (i.e., unequal access to economic resources) exist to some extent in many societies, and these characteristics are fundamental to the caste system. Is Thapar then arguing that the caste system is incipiently present in various societies? The argument here is that these two characteristics are necessary but not sufficient to make the caste system work. What distinguishes a caste society is the presence of “a theoretically irreversible hierarchy” enforced in the name of “a super-natural authority”. In other words, when Hinduism doctrinally imposes “social disparities” and irreversible quantitative inequality on its people, it transforms into the so-called caste system. Regardless of whether scholars have conclusively demonstrated the existence of such a social system in India, the pertinent question for us is: Did the Greeks communicate these crucial features of the caste system in their writings?

Thapar expresses some reservations about the Greek sources elsewhere: “[I]t must be remembered that the [Greek] authors were foreign to India, and therefore looked on the country and its customs with alien eyes. ... [Therefore,] it is possible that they may at times have confused the practical and theoretical aspects of a question. A case in point is Megasthenes’ description of the seven castes in India” [Thapar 1961, 11]. That is, the Greek writers did not witness the social practice of the caste system but only took what Brahmins were saying about it as true. (Remember that Hindu religious texts were not available in writing yet at that time). However, since they did not see or understand and therefore did not report “a theoretically irreversible hierarchy enforced in the name of a supernatural authority”, they must have only taken into consideration those aspects that *would be present in a minimal way in many societies*. In other words, to repeat, the Greeks did not observe the caste system and its properties. Nevertheless, Thapar seems to miss the significance of her own insight and insists that even though “the later rigidity of the caste system was not prevalent in all its forms in Mauryan times” (322–180 BCE), “the process of [its] crystallization had [already] begun”, and as it “is evident from Megasthenes’ account of Indian society”, the “theoretical aspect of the caste system had been fully accepted” [Thapar 1961, 56]. (Just to note a different view here, Bronkhorst has recently asserted the opposite of it. Citing a work by Karttunen [Karttunen 1997], he notes that the Megasthenian sevenfold division of Indian society does not align with the fourfold varna division because, at the time, this “theoretical division of society had not yet been accepted” [Bronkhorst 2007, 361]).

What should one look for in Megasthenes’s accounts, then? Should one look for the distinguishing properties of the caste system? That would not be sufficient. His accounts should also show us that while Brahmins had fully accepted the theoretical aspect of the caste system, society at large had begun to adopt some of those aspects since the system was still in its early stages of crystallisation. Scholars have never even come close to establishing this. What do they argue for, then? As we shall see soon, Thapar’s explanations are typical of the last three centuries of scholarly work on this subject. They raise questions over the validity of Greek descriptions of Indian society but also maintain that these writings provide some evidence for the presence of the caste system in India. As scholars begin to locate the elusive “evidence” in Greek writings for the caste system, the argument becomes immensely complicated and unreasonable. Therefore, this article proposes to tackle such a complicated argument from three angles: a critical examination of Greek texts to challenge their interpretations, a historical overview of how these interpretations have evolved over time, and an analysis of some of the interpretations.

I. Greek Classic Texts on Caste Hierarchy, Endogamy, and Occupational Constraints

As noted earlier, there is now a consensus that Greek writers gave at least a cursory description of a few key properties of the caste system, including hierarchy, endogamy, and occupational constraints. Let us examine the Greek writings on these topics in more detail.

Seven-fold Division of Indian Society

One of the observations of Megasthenes (350–290 BCE),¹ which is popular among modern scholars, divides Indian society into seven groups: (1) Philosophers, (2) Husbandmen, (3) Neatherds, Shepherds, Herdsmen, and Hunters; (4) Artisans or traders, (5) Warriors, (6) Overseers, (7) Councillors and Assessors [McCrimdell 1877]. Over the past two centuries, scholars have interpreted this division as an explicit reference to the hierarchical structure of the caste system. However, a closer examination of the relevant Greek texts reveals that either this division lacks a hierarchical structure or multiple levels of hierarchy must be invoked to comprehend it. If we map these seven divisions onto

various axes commonly associated with the caste system, such as purity or social status ranking, we will discover that the same group occupies distinct positions within the hierarchy. Consider a few examples from McCrindle's 1877 collection of excerpts attributed to Megasthenes. While philosophers are "in point of dignity preeminent over all", "the Councillors and Assessors ... [are] the most respected", and on account of their "high character and wisdom", they get "the highest posts of government" [McCrindle 1877, 40, 43, 85]. While the Husbandmen are regarded as a class that is "sacred and inviolable" and are "exempted from fighting and other public services" [McCrindle 1877, 33, 41], an Artisan is "not only exempted from paying taxes, but even receives maintenance from the royal exchequer". If someone "causes an artizan to lose his hand or his eye, he is put to death", and the philosophers can be punished for giving "false information thrice" [McCrindle 1877, 42–43, 71, 83–85]. The most one can say from these excerpts, then, is that each member of the seven groups enjoys their own power, privileges, and prestige in different domains.

Even though placing someone at the beginning of a list need not be indicative of their position in the order, we can note the following: while the philosophers are described as "first in rank" in Diodorus Siculus (c. 90 – c. 30 BCE) and Strabo's (63 BCE – 24 CE) excerpts from Megasthenes, in Pliny (23–79 CE) and Solinus (fl. 200), they are the fifth in the order [McCrindle 1877, 40, 83, 155, 136].

Occupation and Marriage Restrictions

There is, however, one privilege of the philosophers which seems to support the notion that Greek writers did describe a hierarchical structure within Indian society. Judging from J. W. McCrindle's translations of Megasthenes into 19th-century English, which anachronistically give him words like "caste", one could be inclined to believe that those ancient Indian philosophers did enjoy a special privilege bestowed upon them. "No one is allowed to marry out of his own caste or to exchange one profession or trade for another, or to follow more than one business. An exception is made in favour of the philosopher, who for his virtue is allowed this privilege" [McCrindle 1877, 85–86]. In the words of Arrian (86 – c. 160 CE),

"the custom of the country prohibits intermarriage between the castes: for instance, the husbandman cannot take a wife from the artizan caste, nor the artizan a wife from the husbandman caste. Custom also prohibits any one from exercising two trades, or from changing from one caste to another. One cannot, for instance, become a husbandman if he is a herdsman, or become a herdsman if he is an artizan. It is permitted that the sophist only be from any caste for the life of the sophist is not an easy one, but the hardest of all" [McCrindle 1877, 212–13].

Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian of the mid-first century BCE, also describes the seven-fold division of Indian society and notes that "no one is allowed to marry a person of another caste or to follow another calling or trade, as, for instance, that one who is a soldier should become a farmer, or an artisan should become a philosopher" (§ 2.41.5)². He does not, however, mention the privilege of the philosophers to circumvent these restrictions. A few decades later, Strabo criticises all previous writers on India as fabricators, including Megasthenes, and yet explicitly quotes him in his *Geography* and observes that a philosopher is free to change his occupation, pursue multiple occupations, or wed outside of their caste [Strabo 1930, 83].

Although it may initially appear reasonable to interpret caste-endogamy, fixed occupation, and exceptions for Brahmins from these claims, such an interpretation overlooks an intriguing observation made by these Greek writers. The exceptions granted to philosophers are not based on their group identity but on the manner they live. While Megasthenes notes that the philosopher "for his virtue is allowed this privilege", according to

Arrian, it is because “the life of the sophist is not an easy one, but the hardest of all” [McCrimdle 1877, 86, 213]. Similarly, Strabo attributes privilege to the “virtue” of philosophers [Strabo 1930, 83].

Virtue and Related Issues

Even though we cannot digress here into a discussion of “virtue”, *arête* in Greek, which earns philosophers their privilege, there is something important here that needs to be pointed out. As an anonymous reviewer of this article pointed out, the idea of virtue has an “axially ontological root, which cannot be taken as a sociological concept that it never was”. The Greek writers we spoke about so far attribute the privilege of the philosophers to their “virtue”. However, are scholars making a category mistake when they associate this privilege with the caste system? For instance, Stoneman points out that “Megasthenes did identify the two key aspects of the [caste] system: hereditary occupation and endogamy” [Stoneman 2019, 217]. That is a decision best left to philosophers and scholars of ancient Greek philosophy. The contention here is simple: whatever “virtue” is, if scholars want to use it or any of its components as proof to argue that Brahmins enjoyed caste-based privileges, then they must account for some of the following issues.

The privilege of the philosophers that Greeks talk about is attributed to a specific way of living and not identity. Irrespective of what nuances and interpretations one can claim for the idea of *arête*, this notion is fundamentally about how one lives. When Strabo, for example, refers to philosophers in general, throughout his multi-volume work *Geography*, he “remarks on their behaviour, rather than on their ideas” [Parmar 2015, 142]. It should not be contentious, then, to claim that a philosopher is distinguished from others because she or he excels in something. If the privilege of a philosopher can thus be seen as related to his excellence in some aspects of life, privileges enjoyed by Indian philosophers need not look like a gift of the caste system.

A caste scholar may now argue that the excellence attributed to philosophers – in this case, Brahmins – is not acquired but inherited. However, Greek writers do not leave this issue open for interpretation. Consider how classical writers depict the lives of Indian and other philosophers. According to Megasthenes, the high status of philosophers is attributed to their possession of certain characteristics: “in point of dignity”, they are “preeminent over all”, as they are “neither the masters nor the servants of others”. A philosopher, whether man or woman, “despises pleasure and pain, as well as life and death” and “undergo[es] much discipline as a preparation for death” [McCrimdle 1877, 40, 100]. Pliny refers to Indian philosophers as “persons devoted to wisdom, a group highly esteemed by them”. Apuleius, a writer from the 2nd century CE, highlights the “Bracmani” for their resilience in enduring physical hardships [both cited in: Parker 2008, 276]³. Strabo introduces his work thus: “The science of Geography, ... as much as any other science, [is] a concern of the philosopher.... [And a philosopher, is] the man who busies himself with the investigation of the art of life, that is of happiness”, or in Greek, *eudemonia* [Strabo 1917, 3–5].

These lives are described as arduous, as Arrian states, “not an easy one, but the hardest of all”. The hardships mentioned encompass various aspects, ranging from physical hardships such as frugal living and minimal clothing to a life of rigour and discipline. For instance, “[t]hey predict about such matters as the seasons of the year, and any calamity which may befall the state”. However, “if any one fails thrice to predict truly, he [is] ... obliged to be silent for the” rest of his/her life [McCrimdle 1877, 209].

Even if we grant that philosophers lived a life of hardship and excelled in something, a caste scholar may still ask how it could serve as a prerequisite for marrying outside one’s group, a privilege attributed to philosophers. A closer inspection of the Greek texts that discuss this issue can shed more light on it. Consider the way this issue is formulated. While Arrian, referring to Megasthenes, writes that it is forbidden to marry outside

one's group or switch groups, he also asserts that "it is permitted that the sophist [i.e., philosophers] only be from any caste" [McCrimdle 1877, 213].

By implication, then, a person from any group can become a philosopher, and a philosopher can marry anyone. Changing vocation and marrying outside one's community, thus, depend on the ability to become a philosopher. Put differently, those who excel in something acquire the privilege of *changing occupations*. Note here that for these Greek writers, "philosophers" or virtuous people included both men and women [e.g.: McCrimdle 1877, 100]. Nearchus mentions how gymnosophists' wives engage in philosophy [Strabo 1930, 115]. Strabo adds that "women associate with them [Pramnae] but do not have intercourse with them" [Strabo 1930, 125]. This suggests that even a woman could change professions and marry outside of her group if she had the requisite virtues. Note that one can also interpret this to say that when (at least some of) the philosophers, whether women or men, married, they married only outside of their community of philosophers.

What can we surmise from the discussion so far? (1) If it was permitted that philosophers could come from any of the seven groups and can also marry outside of their group, it implies that all capable people of any group, men or women, could overcome marriage and occupation restrictions. (2) If philosophers could marry someone from any group, it further indicates that people from any group could marry a philosopher too, and thus outside of their group. Therefore, if "philosophers" are considered a separate group (a separate caste), one's inclusion in this caste group can be based either on virtues or marriage alliances. (3) It is also possible to argue that philosophers could not have a stable group or social identity (i.e., "Brahmin identity") and the corresponding status or ranking, if they were free to move between groups. (4) The supposed "exceptions" for philosophers, thus, arise from a misinterpretation of what Megasthenes and others say about the process and criteria for becoming a philosopher or this entire discussion of the "privilege of philosophers" as *caste privilege* is based on a category mistake.

II. European Writings: 13th to 18th Centuries

Throughout the late Middle Ages, Europe's primary informational sources about India were the millennia-old Greek and Christian literature. When Europe borrowed from Greek literature, it also borrowed it along with the early Christian attitudes towards Indian philosophers. As a result, when Europe spoke about gymnosophists, there were two different elements in it: the pagan admiration for the philosophers and the Christian critique of them. (See Hahn [Hahn 1978] for an overview of early Christian criticisms of Indian philosophers. See also: [Gelders 2009]). The colonial form of these criticisms did not emerge for more than three centuries.

Marko Polo (c. 1254–1324), the famous Italian explorer, is probably the first one to talk about Bragmanos, whom he calls (in the words of its first English translator, John Frampton, in 1579) "the truest men in the world", as they do not lie "for all the world", nor "honour the Idols" [Penzer 1937, III]. His views about these Bragmanos are a mix of both the old pagan appreciation and the later Christian criticism, notes a recent scholar [Juncu 2016, 55–56]. Such largely positive views about Brahmins were prominent in this period. For instance, speaking about the Brahmins, the reputed poet of the Italian Renaissance, Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), could declare, "I like their contempt for this world [. . .] I like their solitude, I like their freedom", wonder "If there once were many of them, what stops there being one left today?", as well as criticise them for their unchristian ideas, their "heresy" (cited and translated by: [Juncu 2016, 81–83]).

When Bartholomew Anglicus wrote on India in his well-known Latin encyclopedia *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, in the middle of the 13th century, he made use of many Greek writers, including Strabo and Pliny [Anglicus 1582, chap. 73]. And at some point, much in the spirit of the ancient writers, he presents the seven-fold division of Indian

society and Brahmins as those who give themselves “principally to Religions, and to learning of wit and of wisdom”. Similarly, while Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), another important Italian Renaissance scholar, wrote about gymnosophists much in the same positive vein [Juncu 2016, 87–90], Theodor Zwinger [Zwinger 1586, 386], a mid-16th century Swiss humanist scholar, emphasised their austere and ascetic lifestyle.

However, before the end of Renaissance humanism around the 16th century, two things emerged clearly. (a) Once mostly theological, criticism of Indian philosophers evolved into a societal critique and personal slander, at the same time becoming excessively vituperative. Three important scholars who came from three different parts of Europe set the tone and provided content for this new model of criticism: Ludovico di Varthema (c. 1470–1517), an Italian adventurer; Duarte Barbosa (c. 1480–1521), a Portuguese writer and officer; and Saint Francis Xavier (1506–52), a Spanish Catholic missionary⁴. (b) Scholars began to assert that despite a historical connection between the contemporary Brahmins and ancient Indian philosophers, they significantly differ from one another. For instance, *Dictionarium Historicum*, first published in 1553, contrasts between the Brachmanæer that Strabo and Pliny spoke about and “Bramines in India today” [Estienne 1609]. Interestingly, the Brahmins in Varthema [Varthema 1863, 141–142], Barbosa [Barbosa 1518, 115–116], and Xavier [Coleridge 1881, 157–159] were not antiquated philosophers, but rather contemporary priests, malicious and oppressive, who worshipped the devil.

Writing a century later, in 1613, Roberto de Nobili, an Italian priest who worked in South India, synthesised various perspectives of the time, including references to Megasthenes, Strabo, and others, stating that Indian philosophers

“live frugally, taking their meals seated on skins and hides. They abstain from flesh meat and sexual intercourse, fully intent on serious discussions. Nearcus too mentions the brahmins when treating of the Sophists. He says that there are those among the brahmins who attach themselves to kings as their counselors, while others engage in contemplation and in considerations about the things of nature. Clitarus too speaks about brahmins, describing them as shrewd men with a partiality for controversy. He mentions that they go in for physiology and astronomy. ... Hence I do not know on what authority or ground anyone may get it into his head to suppose that the brahmins constitute a class of superstitious priests. Even our own Western writers cry out against such a notion. Whoever holds a notion so glaringly false as to contend that brahmins are a priestly caste will more surely prove his own ignorance of history than prove brahmins to be in any way connected with a priestly office” [de Nobili 2000, 142–143].

The views of de Nobili, the Jesuit priest, that the Brahmins were thinkers and that their customs were civil rather than religious clashed with the other European stance that was gaining traction, which saw them as a class of superstitious priests. By the mid-19th century, the latter perspective became the prevailing truth about India, leading to a common assumption that the classical Greek descriptions of India provided evidence of the existence of the caste system in ancient India.

An answer to the question that de Nobili had asked – “on what authority or ground anyone may suppose that the Brahmins constitute a class of superstitious priests” – was in the making throughout this period. Thomas Herbert, an English traveller and a historian, for instance, wrote about these priests, who “in old times ... were nam’d *Gymnosophi*”. He begins with a flattering account of their life, citing Greek writings, especially the story of “Calanus the Bramyn”, who purportedly accompanied Alexander on his journey back home. And then he asks: “But, how they ... forgot these and broacht new opinions, more fantastick and rediculous”? [Herbert 1638, 39–40]. According to Edward Terry, an English priest who wrote about the Mogul kings, the difference between those whom “the ancient stories call Brachmanes” and the contemporary “illiterare Priests ... called *Bramins*” was that the former were “learned men”, whereas the contemporary “*Bramins* are a very silly, sottish, and an ignorant sort of people, who are so inconstant in

their *principles*, as that they scarce know, what the particulars are which they hold, and maintain as truths” [Terry 1655, 345–346]. And as Alexander Ross, another English priest of the time, wrote, in ancient times, amidst all idolatry and superstition, “the *Brachmans* among them worshipped no Images nor any living creature, were very temperate in their dyet, and gave themselves to contemplation of divine things”. However, speaking about the Malabar of his day, Ross uses a story that Varthema had popularised over two centuries ago: “*Bramanes*, or Priests (the successors of the old *Brachmannes*) are in such esteeme here, that the King will not converse with his new married Wife, till one of the chief *Bramanes* hath had the first nights lodging with her” [Ross 1655; for another similar example, see Burnet’s essay in: Blount 1693, 77–87].

On what grounds did these writers establish degeneration in Brahmins and the Indian religion? European authors investigated the “absurd philosophy” and “abominable practises” of the Brahmins to address this subject. These developments – the European experience of India as home to “absurd philosophy” and “abominable practises” which serve as the foundation for their abhorrent criticism of Indian culture – are now well documented [see: Balagangadhara 1994]. Consider, for instance, how Herbert answered this question. He explained how Brahmins grew “impious and unthankfull” to their god *Ruddery* through their sins and ignorance, and *Ruddery* punished them as a result. It is significant for us to recognise the part that the Greeks eventually played in this tale of degeneration. Some claim that the Greeks gave Indians the concept of metempsychosis [Herbert 1638, 47, 43] and probably even idolatry. Indians once “worshipped their own gods, till *Bacchus* and *Alexander* subdued them, and then the Grecian deities were honoured amongst them”. And now the Malabarians hold “not onely the immortality of Soules, both of beasts and men, and transanimation, but also a divinity in Elephants, Kine, and other beasts”, as Ross noted [Ross 1655, 81, 85]. According to Theophilus Gale, an English priest and a scholar, “Pyrrho the Head of the Scepticks is said to have conversation with the Gymnosophists in Indiae”, as did “Apollonius Tyanaeus, that great Pagan Antichrist” [Gale 1672, 79]. He did not speculate on the outcomes of these encounters but pointed out that, among other things, *Brachmanes* believed in “*Transmigration of Souls into Beasts*, especially into *Oxen*”. Besides the Greek roots of the ideas of *Brachmanes*, their “Body of Learning” also resembles not Christian European philosophy but “the natural Theology of the Ancients”, wrote Thomas Burnet soon [Blount 1693, 79].

During this period, there was no unified and dominant narrative of the caste system as we understand it today. Consequently, the Greek descriptions of India and the Indian “caste system” were not yet directly linked. Writers of the time did not associate the Greek descriptions of the seven-fold division of Indian society or marriage-related restrictions with the caste system. For example, see de Nobili’s “Report Concerning Certain Customs of the Indian Nation”, written as early as 1613 [De Nobili 2000, 142–143; see also: Chambers 1728; Sale et al. 1748, 76; Maurice 1794]. Instead, they primarily focused on appreciating the ancient Brahmins [as in: Gale 1672, 78, 79; Sale et al. 1748, 76, 77; Lempriere 1788] or criticising the modern ones, sometimes with a brief criticism of the ancients. This is how Thomas Burnet and William Wotton, writing in the 1690s, approached the topic. Even though “the Brachman Philosophers have in all Times been famous ... [for giving] themselves up continually to Contemplation”, both modern and ancient Brachmans are “too much addicted to Mythological Learning”, which is “impure, and liable to many Corruptions” [Burnet 1736, 20, 23]. According to Wotton, the Brachmans and Bramines were also accused of placing “the highest degrees of Sanctity and Prudence in half-starving themselves, and depriving themselves of the lawful Conveniences of Life”. Wotton did not leave the implications of his observations hidden: the Greek “Stories of the extraordinary Wisdom of the Ancient Brachmans are in a great measure fabulous, because in the idle and bigoted part of the Narrative they do so particularly agree with the Modern Bramines” [Wotton 1705, 139–140].

This trend continued into the 18th century when it became widely accepted that the “modern brachmans are the successors of the ancient” philosophers [Chambers 1728; see also: Bayle and Maizeaux 1735, 117; “Of the Bramins” 1731, 245], because they “in many points, retain the tenets of the ancient Brachmans” [Anonymous 1774, 300; see also: Massey 1752, 271–272]. However, there were also criticisms that they “have little of the Gravity and Wisdom of the ancient Brachmans” [Ziegenbalg 1714, 27]. Abraham Roger⁵ captured the prevailing sentiment of the time thus: “The superstitious care these people [the modern Brahmins] take to follow the customs and propagate the opinions of their ancestors, be they ever so absurd and senseless, plainly shows, they would have preserved learning with equal care, had there been any of it to preserve” [Millar 1731, 134, 135]. Robert Millar compared the descriptions of “Bramines” by ancient writers like Strabo with those by modern European scholars such as Abraham Roger and Francois Bernier, concluding that both ancient Brachmans and modern Bramines shared a common ignorance and adherence to absurd superstitions [Millar 1731].

III. The Story of the Boutta (Buddha)

The European discovery of Buddhism around this time was a major influence on the narrative of degenerate Brahmins. While this exercise was well underway in other parts of Asia already in the 16th century, it arrived in India somewhat belatedly [App 2010; De Jong 1976; Lopez Jr. 2013]. When it did arrive, it had an important effect on the then-developing story of the Indian caste system.

Although much has been written on the relations between Greece and Buddhism [Vassiliades 2004; Beckwith 2017], Greek writings do not mention the name Buddha in any of its recognisable forms until the Christian era. The earliest extant mention of a certain al-Budd appears in the pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana, a 1st-century Greek philosopher [Haq 1996, 55]. In the following century, Clement of Alexandria, a Christian apologist, speaks of a group of philosophers in India “who follow the precepts of Boutta” [McCrinde 1877, 104]. Two centuries later, in his work *Against Jovinianus*, Saint Jerome, a Church Father, briefly notes an “authoritatively handed down” opinion that “Budda” (or Buddam in the original Latin) is “the founder of ... [the] religion” followed by the Gymnosophists of India, whom they believe was born of a Virgin [Jerome 1893, 380]. As we know today, there are no other mentions of this Boutta/Buddam in Greek or subsequent Christian literature until the 10th-century Byzantine Greek historical encyclopedia, *the Suda*, which refers to Buddas and Brahmins⁶. This encyclopaedia has been “edited and published several times since the end of the 14th century”⁷. It was after this period that the Buddas and Buddhism (in various spellings) were regularly mentioned in connection with the Indian philosophers⁸. In the 1610s, de Nobili distinguished Buddhists from other Indian “wise people” as well as other idolatrous sects and described them as a very ancient group of atheists in India [De Nobili 2000]. A century later, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) made interesting observations about Buddhists. In the intervening years between these two influential scholars, not much was written on the subject in the Indian context, except for a brief mention of St. Jerome and *the Suda*, the 10th-century Byzantine Greek encyclopaedia, in Theoph Gale [Gale 1672, 79].

Ziegenbalg’s account of Buddhists speaks about certain *Buddergöl* and *Schammanergöl*, the two “nations” with their native religions, and how Lord Vishnu chased them out of India during one of his *avatars*. Ziegenbalg neither clarifies how he arrived at these names nor says much about these groups⁹. However, as Urs App explains, a French orientalist called Maturinus Veyssièrre La Croze, writing in 1724, adopted and developed this story further, giving it some crucial twists [App 2010, 116–117]. (a) He explicitly identified Buddergöl as “worshippers of Buddha”, and (b) he linked them to Porphyry’s distinction between Sarmanes and Brachmanes. (c) He claimed that the “Boutta” of Clement of Alexandria and the Boudda of St. Jerome are the same. (d) He went a step further and

linked the Boutta/Boudda to “the Sommona-Codom of Southeast-Asian missionaries, the Xe-kia of the Chinese, and the Xaca of the Japanese” and insisted that they all refer to the same “person worshipped by Ziegenbalg’s Puffers or Buddergöls” [App 2010, 118].

Ziegenbalg and La Croze’s portrayal of India, like that of de Nobili, largely followed the then-standard European model of depicting India as a degenerate culture with a corrupt religion. However, their portrayal of ancient Indian Brahmins as wise people and ancient Buddhists as idolaters who spread superstition in India and China was a minor aberration [see also: Lopez Jr. 2013, 18], which did not last long. The developing narrative of the caste system and its immoral priests called Brahmins quickly assumed a key position in the European experience of India.

In 1765, Louis de Jaucourt summarised the debate over Indian religion, specifically citing La Croze, in his entry “Samanén”, which appeared in the French *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Vol. XIV, pp. 590a–591b), begun by marking Samanæi and Brachmanes as two separate and “principal sect[s] of the Indian religion” [Jaucourt 2012]. The Brachmanes, whom the Greeks called *Germanés*, “were originally an exclusive tribe or caste, whereas, in principle, anyone could become a *Samanean*”. After talking about their pious and “austere life”, he notes that while there “was little difference between the” two groups in the past, “[t]hose closest to their spirit today, however, are the Buddhist monks of Siam” (Thailand). The “Butta” that Saint Clement refers to is assumed to be the Buddha here. He then recounts La Croze’s story of how Buddhists detested Brahmins in Malabar and how their god Vishnu punished them. Jaucourt concludes by stating that the “Hindu religion, which derives from this source, is no longer that of *Samaneans*. It is, rather, that of the mass, which is incapable of entertaining the great ideas, and profound meditations taken up by the followers of Buddha” [Jaucourt 2012].

Thus, even though the Greeks themselves had nothing to say about a certain Boutta, they were drawn into the story surrounding him. This led to a new cottage industry of scholars looking for evidence in ancient Greek writings for the European story of Indian culture, its degeneration, and the resultant caste system.

IV. At the Turn of the 19th Century: Reading Caste System into Greek Sources

Scholars started working on two problems pertaining to the understanding of Indian religion in the late 1700s. Initially, the variety of names given to groups of Indian philosophers¹⁰ had to be arranged and segregated into identifiable religious identities. In other words, de Jaucourt’s assertion that *Germanés* are *Samanaei* and that today it is the Buddhists who are “closest to their spirit” needed proving. And then the story of the four varnas of the caste system, which was gaining traction after Europeans had “discovered” Sanskrit texts, had to be integrated with the Greek categorisation of Indian society into seven sections. The Scottish priest and historian William Robertson, in his *An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India* [Robertson 1804, 357], published in 1791, made three huge claims: (a) that “[a]ccording to all the writers of antiquity, the Indians said to be divided into seven tribes or casts”; (b) that this was an error because they took “some of the subdivisions of the casts” to be “distinct independent order[s]”; and (c) that “they were no more than four original casts, we learn from the concurring testimony of the best-informed travellers”. Robertson did not bring any new facts to the table. He, however, quoted from European writers (like Abraham Roger, who “acquired information concerning the manners and religion of the Indians, more authentic and extensive than was known to Europeans”) and recent “translations from the Sanskreet language”, including the Laws of Manu. He asserted that “[t]here remains now no doubt with respect either to the number or the functions of the casts, as both are ascertained from the most ancient and sacred books of the Hindoos, and confirmed by the accounts of their own institutions, given by Brahmins eminent for their learning”. In the

process, more importantly, Robertson linked three distinct bodies of writings: contemporary European writings (like Abraham Roger), classical Indian writings (such as Manu), and “all the writers of antiquity” who have written about India.

In 1797, editing a rare account of the voyage of Nearchus, the official and navigator of Alexander the Great, William Vincent noted that Greeks spoke about several “tribes or casts of the Indian nations”, quietly reduced them to four castes and justified with some ingenious explanations: the “four orders of priests, soldiers, husbandmen, and artisans [out of seven] still predominate” in contemporary India [Vincent 1797, 16–17]. However, while the “sixth and seventh classes” are “subdivisions of the others”, the second and third groups are one group. He also noted that intermarriages between these castes were forbidden and that the Pramae disputed with the Brahmins. Vincent concluded by alluding to a Mogul Emperor’s quip that the philosopher and the priest can never agree [Vincent 1797, 15–16, fn. 31].

The question of the identity of the Germani that the Greeks spoke about was resolved simply by identifying them with the Brahmins. Robertson pointed out that the description “of the Germani, which Strabo takes from Megasthenes, applies, almost in every circumstance” to the “numerous orders of Indian devotees”. According to him, the “modern” devotees are known for “the rigour of their mortifications, the excruciating penances which they voluntarily undergo, and the high opinion which the people entertain of their sanctity”. However, these devotees were not the Brahmins, who were “born to enjoy” the “reverence and honours” offered by the lay people [Robertson 1804, 297–298]. Earlier, in 1794, for Thomas Maurice, the orientalist and historian, their clothing was enough to settle the issue:

“Let us attend to his dress, for the reader will ever bear in remembrance the difference subsisting between a brahmin, who is the old brachman, and wears apparel; and the yogee, or old gymnosophist, who, warm with fervid piety, spurns external clothing. A gymnosophist, or Hindoo penitent, is not properly a brahmin; though a brahmin, by adopting severer austerities may become a gymnosophist” [Maurice 1794, 968].

Over the course of a few decades, this story gained such traction that the eminent colonial administrator and writer W. H. Sykes could assert matter-of-factly that it is evident that “sophists or gymnosophists could not have been Brahmans” because the sophists were known for their arduous lives, such as going naked and “ascending the funeral pile” [Sykes 1841, 126].

The Contributions of Henry Thomas Colebrooke

As the story of the caste system and Buddha developed further and all the characters were introduced, the stage was set for the climax. In 1807, H. T. Colebrooke, the famous Sanskrit scholar and orientalist, published a lengthy article on Jains titled “Observations on the Sect of Jains”, where he categorically declared that “it is not difficult to reconcile the distribution” of Indian society into “seven tribes”, as “stated by Arrian and Strabo, with the present distribution into four classes” [Colebrooke 1873, 176, n2]. A key hypothesis of the essay was that Jains and Buddhists are not Hindus. The author supported this with various arguments and references to Greek writers. The conclusion drawn was that Veda-following Hindus preceded Jains and Buddhists as the earliest Indian sects and that “Brachmanes” refers to Brahmins. Six of his main arguments are listed here [Colebrooke 1873, 180–181].

First, the author contended that the descriptions provided by Strabo and Megasthenes regarding the “manners and opinions” of Brachmanes and Germanes appeared to align more closely with orthodox Hindus rather than with the Bauddhas or Jainas. He cited specific examples related to beliefs about the origin and nature of the world, the role of God, and the concept of the soul. Second, the author referred to Strabo’s observation that

Pramnæ “ridiculed the Brachmanes, for their study of physiology and astronomy”. Third, the author cited accounts by Philostratus, Hierocles, and Pliny, who noted that the Brachmanes worshipped the sun, which “does not seem to have been at any time practised by the rival sects of Jina and Buddha”¹¹.

A brief reflection is warranted here to consider these three points. The comparisons made by Colebrooke between “Hindus” and “non-Hindu” groups such as Buddhists and Jains are intertwined with the narrative of the caste system and Hinduism, which was developing fast by that time. In this story, Brahmins were depicted as Hindu priests who supported the immoral caste system through, among other things, rituals (like sun worship) and the associated beliefs. It is in this story that Jains and Buddhists emerge as characters who challenge the divine authority of the Vedas and reject it. Therefore, in the context of the European caste story, Pramnæ’s mockery of the Brachmanes for their “study” suggests that the two are distinct sects and that the Pramnæ are morally superior to the Brachmane.

It is not unexpected that Colebrooke “discovered” a portrayal of the varna and the caste system in Greek writings. However, his cautious approach in formulating his ideas was only because the colonial story of the caste system had not yet fully evolved at that time. Expectedly, some of Colebrooke’s initially hesitant suggestions were subsequently reformulated with greater confidence. For example, when Horace Hayman Wilson, an Oxford University Sanskrit professor and Colebrooke’s close friend, published “Sketch of the religious sects of the Hindus” in Calcutta in 1846, he wrote with no hesitation that as far as Greek descriptions of “the customs or observances of the Gymnosophists” are concerned, “we have no reason to conclude that any but the followers of the Vedas are intended”.

The fourth argument of Colebrooke was about his interpretation of St. Porphyrius’ (c. 347–420 CE) remarks on two orders of Gymnosophists, Brachmanes and Samanæans [Colebrooke 1873, 181–182]. According to Porphyrius, “the Brachmanes receive religious knowledge, like the priesthood, in right of birth; but the Samanæans are select, and consist of persons choosing to prosecute divine studies”. Quoting Bardesanes, Porphyrius notes further that “all the Brachmanes are of one race; for they are all descended from one father and one mother. But the Samanæans are not of their race; being selected from the whole nation of Indians”. In these remarks of Porphyrius’, Colebrooke found evidence for the key claims of the European story of the caste system: that the Brachmanes are a “hereditary order of priesthood” and that Buddhist Samanæans were “Sannyasis” or ascetics, and may have come from “any of the sects of Hindus”. He concludes by noting that the name “Samanæans” “seems to bear some affinity to the Sramanas, or ascetics of the Jainas and Bauddhas”.

Porphyrius was not the earliest Greek writer to make such observations. Callisthenes of Olynthus (c. 360–327 BCE), a Greek historian, had already heard about the “Brachman nation [which] was not an order like that of the monks, which one could enter if he chose – but a society, admission into which was allotted from above by the decrees of God”. Similarly, Bardaisan, a Syriac author from the 2nd century CE, makes a comparable point. The Brachmans, he contends, “succeed by right of birth to this kind of divine wisdom as a priesthood. The Samanaeans, on the other hand, are selected and consist of persons who have conceived a wish to devote themselves to divine wisdom” [both cited in: Majumdar 1960, 437, 425].

These assertions offer room for diverse interpretations. One can interpret them the way Colebrooke did. If the caste-system story is assumed as true, like Colebrook, one could agree that Callisthenes and Bardaisan are referring to the hereditary acquisition of Brahmin caste status. If not, alternative explanations are possible. For instance, one may interpret them as a suggestion that some individuals possess certain skills or qualities inherently (“Brachman”) while others must exert effort to attain them (“monks”). Just as

it is common to describe someone as a “born artist” or how “something comes naturally to someone”, one could also remark that someone is “given to wisdom by birth”. Megasthenes accords it with a more story-like structure.

“From the time of their conception in the womb they [that is, Brachmanes] are under the guardian care of learned men, who go to the mother and, under the pretence of using some incantations for the welfare of herself and her unborn babe, in reality give her prudent hints and counsels. The women who listen most willingly are thought to be the most fortunate in their children” [McCrindle 1877, 98].

Whatever it is that Megasthenes is describing here, those who are familiar with the Mahabharata may notice that it resembles the story of Abhimanyu, who learnt to break a difficult military formation while still in his mother’s womb. If we now compare Megasthenes’ descriptions with Callisthenes’ from a century earlier, cited earlier (“Brachman nation was not an order like that of the monks, which one could enter if he chose – but a society, admission into which was allotted from above by the decrees of God”), we can see that they are essentially two distinct formulations of the same information.

To return to Colebrooke, his four points described so far do not justify translating “Samanæans” as (Buddhist) Shramana. At this point, it is only possible to say that Brachmanes and Samanaeans refer to two slightly distinct groups of philosophers. Two further points come to his rescue.

Fifth, Colebrooke presents the phonological similarity between the words Samanæans and Shramana as evidence that Samanæans “seems to bear some affinity to the Sramanas or ascetics of the Jainas and Bauddhas” [Colebrooke 1873, 182]. Col. William Henry Sykes, a well-known Indologist, also reiterates this claim [Sykes 1841, 134]. A few years later, E. A. Schwanbeck, who collected and published the scattered fragments of Megasthenes’ now-lost *Indica* in 1846, concluded that the term “Germanes” “found in all the MSS. of Strabo are incorrect”, and the correct word is “Sarmanes”. Moving from the phonological similarity proposed by Colebrooke, we now turn to the graphical similarity to settle the matter. “The mistake need not surprise us, since the ΣΑ [pronounced as ‘Sa’] when closely written together differ little in form from the syllable ΓΑ [pronounced as ‘Ga’]” [McCrindle 1877, 98, fn.*].

Sixth, further supporting his argument, Colebrooke made what he refers to as a “most in point” or an extremely important point. Citing a passage from Clement of Alexandria’s description of two types of Indian Gymnosophists, Sarmanes and Brachmanes, he described a group of Sarmanes called Allobii in terms of their austere way of life. He then declared that “[t]here are likewise, among the Indians, persons obeying the precepts of Butta” [Colebrooke 1873, 182–183].

Consolidation of the Story

Neither Colebrooke nor any other scholar ever has provided conclusive evidence to support the claim that the Greeks were referring to the Indian caste system. Colebrooke’s arguments are based on a collection of random facts and claims woven together into a narrative. For example, he quotes diverse writers, from the Greek historian Strabo (63 BCE – 24 CE) to the bishop of Gaza, St. Porphyrius (c. 347–420 CE), who is said to have converted Gaza to Christianity. Megasthenes (350–290 BCE), a historian and diplomat, is also mentioned indirectly through Strabo. These writers span different domains and cover seven centuries. Colebrooke brings together their observations about the Brachmanes, stories about Pramnae making fun of them, and the fact that the Brachmanes worshipped the sun. He also presents observations about how religious knowledge is received by Samanaeans and Brachmanes, a description of the austere lifestyle of the Sarmanes, and some phonological observations about the manuscripts. He then connects all these things with texts from ancient India, such as the Vedas and Sankhya,

and contemporary ethnographical data, such as the ones collected by Colin Mackenzie. Given the wide range of material that Colebrooke connected randomly, if his arguments looked credible to his contemporaries and later scholars, the credit should primarily go to the persuasive power of the story of the caste system, which he presupposes. That is, the apparent coherence of his narrative and the motivations behind his choices stem from the patterns within the story of the caste system. If we eliminate this caste-system story from the equation, it is evident that Colebrooke's selection of facts and opinions is arbitrary.

Following Colebrooke's 1807 essay, two main trends emerged. The first trend was the insistence that "the natives of Hindoostan ... agree in almost every point with the description given of them by Megasthenes" [Prichard 1819, 373] and other classical writers. Later, writing in 1852 for the third volume of his monumental *Indische Alterthumskunde*, the German Indologist Christian Lassen argued that Indian customs such as endogamy and occupational exclusivism were largely accurately depicted by Megasthenes [Karttunen 1997, 83].

The second trend entailed an examination and analysis of the accuracy and inaccuracies present in the Greek writers' comprehension of Indian society and the caste system and an assertion that the information that they provided, as Elphinstone puts it, contain both "general truth and partial inaccuracy" [Elphinstone 1841, 449–450]. This trend spurred interpretive endeavours aimed at reconciling the various Greek descriptions of India with colonial ethnological hypotheses about the country. For instance, numerous attempts followed that strived to harmonise the Greek notion of India's seven-fold division into the four varnas of Indian society. Such writings cited both Greek descriptions of Indian society and the accounts provided by European writers like Francis Buchanan (1762–1829) and James Forbes (1749–1819). Several authors during the 19th century pursued this approach: Prichard [Prichard 1819, 399], Heeren [Heeren 1833, 315–316, fn. 1], Elphinstone [Elphinstone 1841, 450–451], Schwanbeck in 1846 [cited in: McCrindle 1877, 98, fn.], Dollinger [Dollinger 1862, 52], Wheeler [Wheeler 1874, 192], J. Wilson [Wilson 1877, 339], Bunbury [Bunbury 1879, 561], and Tozer [Tozer 1897, 151].

An inherent aspect of these developments was the growing consensus among writers of that period that the Greeks had indeed documented various aspects of the caste system, with or without some inaccuracies. However, there was no consensus or clarity as to which specific Greek claim describes which aspect of the caste system. Soon, they attributed this confusion to the Greeks themselves. Consequently, the focus of the discussion shifted towards Greek inaccuracies, although these were not regarded as severe. Scholars believed that it was the Greeks who had failed to comprehend the intricacies of the complex Indian social system.

The German historian Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren wrote in his monumental *Ideen über Politik, den Verkehr, und den Handel der vornehmsten Völker der alten Welt* (1815), translated in English in 1833, that a "very slight acquaintance ... with India will be sufficient to prove" that Megasthenes' seven divisions of "Hindu castes" are wrong [Heeren 1833, 315–316, fn. 1]. However, he also defended Megasthenes by suggesting that since he "resided for a short time only at the court of Sandracottus", he may "not immediately have understood the subject". Dollinger similarly remarked that the Greeks described the "most distinctive feature in Hindoo society, the division into castes, ... in a way which agrees in the more important points with native authorities" [Dollinger 1862, 51]. But, he rued, "the Brahmins appeared to the Greeks as philosophers rather than primarily as priests". Numerous other writers also identified such "errors": for example, the authors who wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [Encyclopaedia Britannica 1833, 191], Elphinstone [Elphinstone 1841, 450–451], H. H. Wilson [Wilson 1846, 210], J. Wilson [Wilson 1877, 339], Bunbury [Bunbury 1879, 561], Hunter [Hunter 1886, 168], and Tozer [Tozer 1897, 151].

Once the basics of the narrative about how the ancient Greeks attest to the caste system's existence were established in this century, it never changed. Acknowledging that Greek authors provide evidence for the existence of the caste system, pointing out their errors and attempts to fit them into the then narrative of the caste system became commonplace in the 20th century [see, for example: Smith 1904; Vaidya 1921; Ellam 1930; Blunt 1931; Allan, Haig, and Dodwell 1934; Basham 1954; Srinivas et al. 1959; Thapar 1961]. An analysis of these writings, therefore, is a luxury that the length of this article cannot accommodate.

Conclusion

Let us begin with a summary of the argument so far. Greek writings, primarily from the Hellenistic period onwards, describe various aspects of the life of "Indian philosophers" whom they primarily called Gymnosophists and Brachmanes. Today, scholars link these figures to Brahmins and other (Jain and Buddhist) ascetics and see these descriptions as evidence of the caste system. However, examining the Greek texts reveals that they do not describe the so-called caste system as we understand it today. So, how did the idea that Greeks discussed the caste system emerge? The article examined the changing views about the Brahmins in European literature over time. Initially, they were seen as descendants of the Gymnosophists. Later, under the influence of the Christian Reformation, European writers began to differentiate between ancient and contemporary Brahmins, praising the former and condemning the latter. As narratives of Indian decline emerged, scholars sought its roots in the past. However, no connection between Greek descriptions and the "caste system" was made at this time. In the 18th and 19th centuries, with the crystallisation of the idea of the caste system and the story of the Buddhist revolt against Hinduism, scholars turned to the Greeks for evidence.

In Colebrooke's important essay, we noted how interpretations can shape historical narratives. He demonstrated that writing history is to "interpret" the material in a way that begins to yield the story you intend to narrate, and scholars never stopped doing it. The lack of explicit textual evidence regarding the Greek mention of the so-called caste system or any of its aspects, after Colebrooke, resulted in the proliferation of interpretations to show the caste system in Greek writings. These interpretations take predetermined conclusions about the existence of the caste system and its immoral nature, which I have called the "story of the caste system" here, as true, and force Greek texts to confirm it. Since the integrity of the caste-system-story is the focus here, our understanding of Greek literature permits errors to creep in. Consider these two errors, for instance.

First, as noted earlier, these interpretations ignore the diverse backgrounds, historical periods, and approaches of the Greek authors they quote. Second, attempts to find evidence for the caste system in Greek literature end up insulting both Greek scholars and Indians. While reputed Greek scholars are dumb enough to be misled by Indians, especially the Brahmins, the Brahmins are crafty and ever so eager to mislead even their scholarly guests. The idea that Brahmins (and Indians) are responsible for the errors in Greek descriptions of the caste system, in fact, is an often-repeated old trope in the field [for e.g.: Wilson 1877, 338; Bevan 1922, 409; Thapar 1961, 57].

Either the Greek thinkers showed how ancient Indians practised an immoral caste system or, if my arguments were to hold, they did not. Regardless of which side one would choose at the end of this article, there is something unhappy about the poverty of choices here. Is this all that can be said today about the famed Greek thinkers who wrote about India? No. I propose we could begin to appreciate Greek descriptions of Indian society only when we could look beyond the colonial story of the caste system. The scholarly world has been so preoccupied with saving the story of the caste system that they have failed to notice that Greek descriptions of India do not bolster their story, as they insist, but rather undercut its key properties.

The socio-cultural world that writers like Megasthenes were able to observe seems so profoundly different from the world that our social sciences can conceive today that we would dismiss it as a fantasy. Let us raise a few questions pertaining to this scenario. The Greek scholars mentioned numerous names for Indian philosophers, most of which emphasised their way of life rather than their activities. For instance, “Gymnosophists” mean naked sophists, “Hylobioi” means forest hermits, “Calingae” are those who lived near the sea, “Allobioi” inhabit no cities or houses and “Semnoi” spent their lives naked. The other names in the seven or six divisions of Indian society refer to the occupations performed, such as soldiers, artists, and farmers. What does this observation suggest? Could they not have mentioned, for instance, soldiers fighting in the mountains, at sea, or on horseback? There must have been impoverished traders, for instance, living with minimal clothing or farmers residing in forests. However, it seems that Greek writers used lifestyle-based distinctions – naked, mountain dwellers, etc. – only for the philosophers. The distinction of being a sophist, therefore, lies not in what one does or where one lives, but rather in some other aspect that is captured by the description of their lifestyle. What does this suggest? Does each name hint at a different school of thinking? If each group could produce philosophers, did each group possess its own philosophers, or did all philosophers belong to a single group? Did one relinquish their group membership and identity upon becoming a philosopher? Can we even talk about the “group identity” of these philosophers if they could come from and marry someone from any group? How do we deal with the issue of caste ranking and the moral stigma and prejudice attributed to it in this case?

Only when we shift our focus away from the caste narratives can we begin to answer these questions or at least frame them better to aid further research.

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¹ Today, Megasthenes’ *Indica* is reconstructed by accepting several quotations and paraphrases found in a score of other writers, like Diodorus Siculus (fl. mid-1st century BCE), Strabo (late-1st century BCE), Pliny (mid-1st century CE) and Arrian (early-2nd century CE). Even though it is not certain whether these excerpts are “Megasthenes’ actual words” or not [Stoneman 2022, 16], what matters here is that all these writers belong to classical Greco-Roman period (including early Judeo-Christian writers), and they all speak about Indian philosophers. Note: A fresh translation of Megasthenes’ *Indica* is available now [Stoneman 2022]. However, we will cite from the work that has provided citations to caste scholars for more than a century now [see: McCrindle 1877].

² For Diodorus on India, see his Book II (“Beginning” and Chapters 35–60) and Book III (“Beginning”), available at: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/home.html (accessed February 29, 2024).

³ For a detailed description of this issue: [Parmar 2015, chap. 3] and [Parker 2008, sec. 6.III.1].

⁴ If we see these three writers as Christian scholars of the Muslim world (Muslim rule in the Spanish peninsula ended with the Battle of Granada in 1492), we can begin to identify Muslim connections with India as a key source of their criticism of India and Brahmins [cf.: Jalki 2023].

⁵ Written in the 1630s, Abraham Roger’s trendsetting work *De Open-Deure Tot Het Verborgene Heydendom*, “On the life and the customs of the Bramines”, was immensely popular amongst scholars in the 17th and 18th centuries as a key to the understanding of Indian religion. Even though Roger himself had nothing to say about Greeks, when his work was published posthumously in 1651, it came with elaborate annotations by certain A. W. Jctus, which made multiple connections between Roger’s detailed argument about different castes and references to their law book

called Veda, the descriptions of Brahmins in the teachings of Manu, Greek descriptions of the Indian philosophers and ethnographical observations of other European travellers [Leathley 2019].

⁶ An Arab Muslim writer of this time, Ibn Al-Nadim (d. 995 or 998), also refers to a certain Buddha [Haque 1987, 67].

⁷ The quote is from the homepage of the English translation of the work hosted here: *Suda On Line: Byzantine Lexicography*, available at: www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol-html/ (accessed February 17, 2024).

⁸ For a few conjectural connections between the story of Buddha and other figures known in the West and some minor observations about Buddha made before and during this period, see: [De Jong 1976; Lopez Jr. 2013, chap. 3].

⁹ An anonymous reviewer of this article pointed out that the source of Ziegenbalg is a Portuguese writer Manuel de Faria e Sousa's (1590–1649) *Asia Portuguesa*, which in turn follows a multi-volume work of an Italian priest Fr. Jacob Fenicio (1558–1632) called *Livro da Seita dos Indios Orientais*.

¹⁰ Greek writers, and the subsequent European authors who refer to them, have used many different words to refer to Indian philosophers. Here are some of the names that were in circulation in Europe, collected from the texts referred to in this article: Allobioi, Brachmanes, Brachmans, Brachmanae, Brachmanai, Brachmins, Bragine, Bragmanae, Bargannim, Bragmanni, Bragmanos, Bramanos, Calingae, Garmanes, Gennoi, Germanes, Gymnetes, Gymnetae, Gymnosophistai, Hylobioi, Maccocalingae, Mactocalingai, Pramnae, Samanaeans, Samanaei, Samanaioi, Sarmanai, Sarmanes, Semnoi, Sophist, and many more. And then, some Greek writers make the following “sub-divisions”. For Strabo, the philosophers are divided into Brachmanes and Sarmanes, and among Sarmanes there are Hylobioi and the physicians. Clement of Alexandria makes the same claim, but spells Hylobioi as Allobioi. For Pliny, “Brachmanae, a name comprising many tribes”, include Maccocalingae, Calingae and others [McCrinkle 1877, 98, 102, 133, 134].

¹¹ It is worth noting here, as scholars now agree, “Sun-worship” is not alien to Buddhists [Saran, Gaya 1992, 179]. In fact, the Buddha himself “embodies ... the characteristics of sun-worship” [Beal 1882, 159]. “Dainichi”, the Sun-Buddha is “the principal Buddha venerated by the Shingon sect of Buddhism” [App 2010, 16].

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Д. Джалкі

**Від аскетів до фанатиків: про використання грецьких джерел
для доказу існування кастової системи в Давній Індії**

Давньогрецькі письменники протягом кількох століть писали про "індійських філософів", яких називали також гімнософістами (γυμνοσοφισταί "голі мудреці") та брагманами. Вчені, що сьогодні вивчають Індію, стверджують, що ті мислителі були брагманами та іншими індійськими аскетами. Вони також кажуть, що присвячені Індії грецькі праці й описи цих філософів та пов'язаного з ними соціального контексту свідчать про існування кастової системи, про її характеристики та функціонування. Однак при вивченні грецьких текстів, хоч би й у перекладі XIX ст., виникають сумніви щодо цього твердження. Давні вчені не казали про кастову систему, знайому сьгоднішній мейнстрімній соціології. Якщо так, то як і коли з'явилася думка про те, що греки обговорювали індійську кастову систему? Щоб дістати відповідь, нам потрібно звернутися до того, як протягом тисячоліття

брагмани змальовувалися в європейських працях. Тут можна знайти чимало цікавого. Приблизно до XVI ст. сучасні брагмани вважалися нащадками стародавніх гімнософістів. Однак потім під впливом антиклерикальних поглядів християнської Реформації європейці почали розрізняти давніх і сучасних брагманів. Перших вихваляли за їхній аскетизм, а других засуджували як аморальних фанатиків. Коли в XVII ст. з'явився наратив про виродження індуїзму й індійської цивілізації, вчені почали шукати коріння цього виродження в давньому минулому Індії. Однак через брак уніфікованого домінуючого опису такої кастової системи, яку ми знаємо сьогодні, не було простежено жодного зв'язку між грецькими описами Індії та індійською системою каст. Коли у XVIII–XIX ст. викристалізувалося уявлення про кастову систему й був відкритий буддизм, учені стали приписувати свідчення про існування кастової системи давнім грекам.

Ключові слова: брагмани; браміні; гімнософісти; давні греки; Індія; індуїзм; кастова система

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