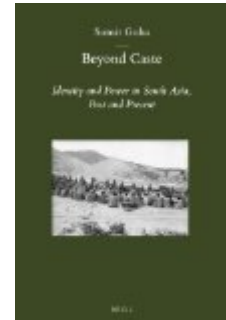


**Sumit Guha.** *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present.*  
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In *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present*, Sumit Guha maintains that academic understandings of social identity in India remain stuck in simplistic cultural explanations of the caste system. He argues that these explanations misrepresent caste as a system basically about Hindu religious values. In Guha's view, such explanations reduce caste to an "Indic avatara of Hegel's absolute spirit" (p. 213). Instead of a simple cultural view, Guha proposes a political-economic perspective that emphasizes how states shape social identity.

Central to Guha's political-economic views are the writings of Fredrik Barth on ethnicity. In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Barth states that "the caste system would appear to be a special case of a stratified poly-ethnic system." [1] Influenced by Barth, Guha concludes that caste is "a highly invioluted and politicized form of ethnic ranking" (p. 7). Barth and Guha not only define caste as a form of ethnicity but also posit that culture does not primordially bind social groups but, instead,

marks their boundaries: "The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses." [2] Since boundaries between social groups in South Asia have been and are often mediated by the state, Guha maintains that caste is better suited for political-economic than cultural analysis. Guha adds that his preference for political economy has the further benefit of avoiding (unlike cultural explanations) false dichotomies between society and polity (p. 43).

In six chapters (along with an introduction and afterword), *Beyond Caste* addresses how the political economy of states in South Asia impacted social identity. Chapter 1 raises questions about how caste (and not ethnicity) became a "master key" for understanding identity (p. 43). In it, Guha expands historical knowledge about these questions by extending his frames of reference back to the early modern period. Chapter 2 extends this time frame back to the second century BCE. Guha argues that *janapada* (i.e., not a caste-like but an

ethnicity-like identity focused around “village clusters”) was South Asia’s dominant form of social identity. He demonstrates how this dominance waned in the early modern period when emerging states weakened the autonomy of village clusters. Chapter 3 explores how this weakening transformed social boundaries within village clusters. Guha details how early modern states influenced this process by extracting money and loyalty from villages. Chapter 4 maintains that the political economy of states not only transformed identity boundaries within village clusters but also families. Guha contends that early modern state institutions often had more influence over family structure than caste. Chapter 5 illustrates how indigenous states and the East India Company recorded early modern identities. Guha reveals how these records document social identities that resemble ethnicities rather castes. Chapter 6 concentrates on how social boundaries and identities changed between 1800 and 2000. Guha describes how colonial policies and classifications (often based on religion and caste) helped create new classes of agrarian and bureaucratic elites. He concludes that the influence of these elites persisted until challenged by the contemporary “ethnic politics” of tribalism in Pakistan and caste in India.

*Beyond Caste* has positive qualities. It expands scholarship about social identity and caste beyond the colonial period. Guha maintains such an expansion is necessary because states in South Asia have influenced social boundaries before and after colonialism. Guha develops a “more comprehensive understanding of both the Indian subcontinent’s present and its millennial past” (p. 16). Unfortunately, with the exceptions of chapters 2 and 5, *Beyond Caste* is not particularly focused on India’s present and/or the millennial past. Instead, its emphasis is on the early modern period. Guha’s excellent analyses of this period are strong reminders of how South Asian social identities, boundaries, and processes often have early modern foundations. Chapter 1 details how

the Portuguese, centuries before the British, conflated race and caste. Chapter 2 argues that the East India Company rose to power by intensifying already existing systems for extracting revenue from villages. Chapter 3 demonstrates that social identities connected to *jajmani* exchange systems need be related to earlier concepts like *baluta* (i.e., the village servant system) and *watan* (i.e., being part of a community). Chapter 4 illustrates how indigenous states, prior to colonialism’s micro-management of familial lives, influenced family structures in early modern South Asia. Chapter 5 addresses how “social classification and enumeration were widely understood and practiced by Indian states well before the onset of colonial rule” (p. 145). These insightful chapters shed light on how the political economy of states shaped social identity in India. They also exhibit a strong understanding of the early modern period and how it influenced later historical periods.

*Beyond Caste* not only expands scholarship temporally but spatially. Guha criticizes cultural explanations for representing the Ganges River area as the “authentic center” of South Asian society (p. 50). Since the cultural values of this area do not evenly occur across South Asia, he maintains that social identities must be understood in relationship to regional histories. *Beyond Caste* is particularly effective at historically carving a space for western India into the political-economic analysis of identity in South Asia. Guha’s history of *baluta* in western India is superb. His arguments about *baluta* being as (if not more) important than the *jajmani* system, which is generally found in northern India, are compelling. Guha’s analyses of Maratha social identity in western India are also noteworthy. They illustrate how the political economy of states, rather than the cultural values of northern India, shaped the ethnicity-like identity of the Marathas. This perspective also leads to historical insights into the participation of non-Hindus (i.e., Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians) in the caste system. Guha convincingly shows that simplistic cultural explanations fail to account for

this participation, both in western India and across South Asia.

While firmly focused on the early modern period, the book occasionally makes jarring chronological jumps. Regarding the history of *janapada*, Guha—in under ten pages—touches on the Mauryan empire (320-187 BCE), the Gupta period (320-550 CE), the Mughal era (1500-1800 CE), the Achaemenid empire (500 BCE), the eighteenth-century Rohilla and Sikh states, and Tom Kessinger's village studies from the 1960s. In another example that spans two pages, Guha starts with Partition in 1947, goes back to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, returns to Partition, moves to Pakistan under Ayub Khan (1958-69), shifts to the Bangladesh War (1971), and then jumps to tribalism in contemporary Pakistan. In fairness, these examples come from chapters 2 and 5, which—more than *Beyond Caste's* other chapters—address South Asia's millennial past and the nineteenth/twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, there are other examples. In chapter 3, Guha discusses the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1909 CE), the *Arthashastra* (300-400 BCE), and early modern Sri Lanka in a single paragraph. Over the next two pages, he goes on to mention fourteenth-century Indo-Islamic India, nineteenth-century Bihar, twentieth-century Bengal, and twenty-first-century Pakistan. These jumps reflect Guha's historical interest in the reproduction of social boundaries. He states that these boundaries are inherently “unstable” and need to be “continually reproduced” over time (p. 50). Such reproduction produces different social categories at different times and places. Despite differences, Guha maintains that these categories frequently refer to ethnicity-like identities. The documentation of these identities and their social boundaries—during, before, and after the early modern period—help account for the chronological jumps in *Beyond Caste*.

With the exceptions of Fredrik Barth and Susan Bayly, who is an expert in early modern India, Guha generally critiques “western anthropolo-

gists” (p. 94). Some of these criticisms are on the mark. His political-economic evisceration of Louis Dumont in chapter 3 and David Mandelbaum in chapter 4 are well argued. Nonetheless, the relevance of these arguments is uncertain since Dumont and Mandelbaum are, along with many others mentioned by Guha, “old school” anthropologists who are no longer particularly prominent. Guha's criticisms of more recent and historically minded anthropologists are also pointed. His statements that Nicholas Dirks is hypocritical in his intellectual opposition to Dumont and that Arjun Appadurai is anachronistic in his understanding of state enumerative regimes are unproductively sharp (pp. 40, 163). Given such criticisms, the caveat that *Beyond Caste* is “most emphatically not a history of anthropological or sociological thought” is inadequate (p. 16). The inclusion of such a history could enhance Guha's critiques while, at the same time, opening a more interdisciplinary conversation about caste and social identity in South Asia. Unfortunately, *Beyond Caste's* polemical approach tends to reaffirm the disciplinary boundaries between anthropology and history. In this sense, anthropology and history are like the Pathan and Baluch ethnicities that Barth writes about in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*: “it is clear that boundaries persist despite the flow of personnel across them.”[3]

Regardless of how one weighs the positive and negative qualities of *Beyond Caste*, its analysis expands our academic understanding of social identity in South Asia. It is particularly welcome for its early modern and western India perspectives on this subject. The book is sure to provoke opinions and promote discussions, which—in the judgment of this reviewer—is what good academic writing should do.

#### Notes

[1]. Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Different* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press), 27.

[2]. Ibid., 15; quoted in part by Guha on 15-16, 16n55, and 41.

[3]. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 9.

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