

## **'So called caste': S. N. Balagangadhara, The Ghent School and the Politics of Grievance.<sup>1</sup>\***

### *Abstract*

This article is concerned with the small but coherent lobby of political scholarship that has emerged from a lineage of research supervision which centres on the charisma and ideas of S. N. Balagangadhara, a philosopher from the Centre for the Comparative Science of Cultures (Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap) at the University of Ghent. In particular, it examines the deployment of his ideas in a spate of recent scholarly and social media declarations that reject the existence of caste and, by extension, caste discrimination. This scholarship - characterised by circular reasoning, self-referencing and a poverty of rigour - has established a modest, if contentious and poorly reviewed, presence in academic spheres of dissemination. The 'Ghent School' describes a group of scholars who rely conspicuously on Balagangadhara's concept of 'colonial consciousness', a crude derivative of Said's thesis of Orientalism. The Ghent School maintain that all extant scholarship on Hinduism, secularism and caste represent an endurance of colonial distortions that act to defame India as a nation. This politics of affront finds considerable traction in diasporic contexts but has little, if any, resonance when mapped against the far more complex politics of caste in India.

Keywords: Balagangadhara, Ghent School, caste, caste violence, Hindu nationalism

'Are you saying that all we have done in 150 years is to say that caste system is more complicated and more complex and fluid?...Take one property of caste system and tell me, in 1850 we

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\* Note from the Editor: this Viewpoint article has been fully double blind peer reviewed.

understood this property in this way, fifty years later we understood this property in this way and currently we understand this property in this way, and show me the progress clearly.'

'I cannot give a sensible answer to a stupid question'.

Verbal exchange between Dunkin Jalki and Chris Fuller, *Caste: Critiquing Colonial and Contemporary Constructions*, Oshwal Centre, UK. 5 April 2014.

The uncomfortable exchange between Dunkin Jalki and Chris Fuller exemplifies the discordance between existing scholarship on caste and that asserted by a group of scholars whose ideas rotate around the work of S. N. Balagangadhara. The Ghent School is distinguished by their reliance on Balagangadhara's concept of 'colonial consciousness' in order to argue that most Anglophonic scholarship on India propagates colonial-era misrepresentations and distortions. Scholars who historicise Hinduism or use the term as a meaningful (if hugely variant) category of analysis, stand accused of succumbing to the distorting mythologies generated by Europeans. Ghent School scholarship is characterised by repetition, a poverty of rigour and a plaintive self-definition as a voice marginalised by dominant, anti-Indian orthodoxies. The UK legal academic, Prakash Shah, has made extensive use of Balagangadhara's work to contest the inclusion of caste as a cognisable category of discrimination in the UK Equality Act. This article does not take a position on whether or not caste discrimination should be recognised in UK law. Instead, it explores the characteristics of the work of the Ghent School, its appeal for a Hindu chauvinist politics and, in particular, its singular position on caste.

### **S. N. Balagangadhara and the Ghent School**

Balagangadhara's monograph, *The Heathen in his Blindness*, was published in 1994 by E. J. Brill and re-published in India by Manohar in 2012. The monograph sets out, at some length, the manifesto that recurs throughout the work of scholars associated with Balagangadhara's supervision at the Centre for the Comparative Science of Cultures and its satellite centre in India, the Centre for the Study of Local Cultures (CSLC) at Kuvempu University at Shimoga in Karnataka. The singular and central thesis is that understandings of Indian religion generated by European contact with South Asia from the sixteenth century onwards were entirely determined by a particular set of post-Enlightenment European preoccupations and, in particular, Protestant Christian thought. These understandings are more than constructions of colonial knowledge; they are manifestations of what Balagangadhara labels 'colonial consciousness', a psychological and epistemological condition that underlies and continues to determine understandings of India and, in particular, Hinduism (Sharma

2017). *The Heathen* is not a text about Hinduism or Indian religion (a category which barely acknowledges Islam) but a refutation of the solidity of any and all categories that have emerged in the English language and through the conventions of scholarly discussions, to describe and think about religion in India. One reviewer of *The Heathen in his Blindness* pointed out that for a text whose principle subject is Indian religion, Balaganadhara has very little of substance to say about it; only twenty-five pages of a book of over five-hundred pages actually concerns itself with any Indian tradition (Larson 1997). The subsequent work of Balagangadhara and his students has repeated and elaborated this core thesis to argue that certain, recurring, categories of study used in India – Hinduism, caste, secularism - are the result of European ‘experience’, distortions generated by the lens of Protestant Christianity. Against evocations of complexity in Indian history, the idea of ‘colonial consciousness’ offers a compelling and singular simplicity.

Balagangadhara’s work on religion and Hinduism occupies an extreme position within an existing field of scholarly discussion on the nature and definition of Hinduism as a category of devotional practice, philosophy and social organisation. Scholars of religion have explored the myriad relationships through which Hinduism was (variously) reconstituted, imagined and invented as a literary, ritual, theological and political subject during the colonial intervention (Lorenzen 2006, Oddie, 2006 Pennington 2005, Smith 2002). Balagangadhara’s work has only a glancing engagement with this diverse body of scholarship, referring to it selectively in order to argue that, ‘the line between the Christian missionaries guided by their religious beliefs and the modern day anthropologists guided by their “sciences” appears continuous and unbroken’ (Balagangadhara 1994, 114). At its best, this scholarship traces out the early-modern, European epistemes through which encounters in India were distilled. Raf Gelders’ 2009 article, ‘Genealogy of Colonial Discourse: Hindu Traditions and the Limits of European Representation’, richly maps the pre-Renaissance and Reformation ideas to which late-eighteenth and nineteenth century constructions of Hinduism owed a largely unrecognised debt. Gelders traces the changing textual understanding of Hinduism from being an extension of, to a perversion of Christianity. The reduced status of Brahmans who came to be regarded as a corruptive religious elite, as ‘crafty friars and priests’, in these texts is central in much of the work of the school (Gelders 2009). An existing corpus of scholarship considers the degree to which Hinduism can, in particular contexts, be understood to be a creature of the European imagination. What is distinct in the work of the Ghent School is the extension argument that is made: that Hinduism, as a western fantasy, cannot be the subject of meaningful analysis. This argument is pursued in another publication, one that uses similar materials, co-authored by Gelders and Balagangadhara and published in 2011. This second article extends the argument to conclude that early modern European texts provided the blue-print for all subsequent scholarly knowledge of

Hinduism. For example, following a translation of a mid-sixteenth century letter written by Francisco Xavier describing Brahmans as ‘the biggest liars and impostors that ever existed’, the authors add that ‘the vision of the Brahmins as it emerges in this work has not been altered to this day’ (Gelders and Balagangadhara, 2011, 112). As sole author of the earlier article, Gelders reminds the reader that colonial formulations of caste had a pre-modern, and specifically European, epistemological genealogy that is often ignored or eclipsed by the modern Historian’s tendency to emphasise, ‘colonial necessities or the demands of modernity’ (Gelders 2009, 589). The second, co-authored, article skips over the eighteenth to twentieth centuries to argue that contemporary analysis is entirely determined, and therefore rendered fallacious, by its pre-modern antecedents.

Balagangadhara’s recurring thesis of ‘colonial consciousness’ bears an immediate and superficial resemblance to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, a text that was first published in 1978 and which finds no mention in the text or bibliography of *The Heathen in his Blindness*. Like Said, Balagangadhara is interested in the means by which the broadest, and most enduring, understandings of India, and in particular Indian religion, were framed and populated by western preoccupations. However, Balagangadhara has explicitly rejected any relationship between his own and Said’s theses in what appears to be wilful misunderstanding of Said’s thesis: ‘if we believe Said, ... [Orientalism] has no impact on the growth and development of the social sciences’ (Balagangadhara and Keppens 2009, 57; see also Balagangadhara 2012, Gelders and Balagangadhara 2011).

While the Ghent School rejects the credibility of existing scholarship on Hinduism, it is equally dismissive of the possibility of a public or political realm beyond or distinct from religion: the ‘secular’. According to Balagangadhara, secularism is an expression of Protestant Christianity’s positioning of its own tacit dominance. Jacob De Roover, his student and now faculty member at *Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap*, argues that the word has no analytical legitimacy in Indian politics and is, therefore, a redundant category of analysis (de Roover 2015). To evoke the secular in India, as either a reality or ideal, is to affirm and accept that enduring dominance of western epistemologies and, in doing so, affirm one’s own ‘colonial consciousness’. Scholars of India are, therefore, damned if their research is concerned with devotional and social expressions of the sacred, and damned if it is not. One might observe that the mere existence of the debate about secularism in India, and the very obvious and diverse iterations of the term in a host of linguistic, scholarly, political and social contexts, would make its discursive expulsion meaningless as well as impractical.

Authors associated with the Ghent School repeat, *ad nauseam*, what most scholars of religion and history regard as axiomatic: that scholarly terms and categories must be subject to critical reflection

and rigorous definition. The Ghent School, in contrast, cultivates a tone of absolute certainty, underwritten by a tacit suggestion that some alternative, more authentic, method of analysis, and by extension Indian selfhood, exists. 'Because of the event of colonialism, Indians lost trust and faith in their own traditions'... colonialism severed, 'our links to the land, to our past and indeed to knowing who we were' (Balagangadhara quoted in Jalki 2018). Beyond these nebulous evocations of a more authentic Hindu identity, the Ghent School offer no new scholarly insight or innovation. Instead, the sum of their argument is that Hindu selfhood has experienced a double violation, first at the hands of European colonialism and, secondly, at the hands of an intellectual class who maintain the presumptions of colonial rule. The Ghent School does not seek to understand the entangled and complex histories of European-Asian interaction but to reduce that past to an axiom: that all scholarship on India is not only wrong, it represents a conspiracy of defamation on a global scale. What is offered is a politically resonant and adaptable argument: that there exists a perpetual cultural and epistemic attack on India generated from abroad and from within Indian scholarly institutions. The next section of this article considers the political currency of this refusal by examining a recent deployment of this argument to argue that caste, and any associated claim, is nothing more than a manifestation of 'colonial consciousness'.

### **The Ghent School and Caste**

There is a substantial, and diverse, scholarly literature that explores the histories of and the social, cultural and political inflections of caste in contemporary India. Historians, influenced by the anthropologist and historian Bernard Cohn, have explored imperial ethnologies that used caste to create rigid codes of identity and the social responses elicited by those scholarly-bureaucratic formulations when they were enacted by census operations or legislation (Appadurai 1988, Cohn 1996, Dirks 2001, Inden 1986, Samarendra 2011). Sociologists and anthropologists have developed reflexive understandings of caste as a living dynamic in Indian society, a property that responds to its definitions in bureaucratic and political realms and is also constructed by everyday relations of kinship, gender, employment, ritual or sociality (Chakravarti 2001, Chandra 2009, Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan 2014, Mosse 2012, Nagaraj 2011, Rawat 2012). Balagangadhara and his followers quote occasionally and selectively from this scholarship but quickly segue from it to maintain the mantra that caste represents a projection of the European imagination and that the use of the term 'caste' as descriptive of any reality in India is an expression of 'colonial consciousness'. Perhaps most revealingly, the Ghent School refuses any and all engagement with

scholarship that explores community and identity in pre-colonial religious, cultural and social contexts (Gandhi 2017, Nicholson 2010).

A 2009 article by Balagangadhara and Marianne Keppens published in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* is illustrative of the Ghent School's position of caste and sheds some light on the dangers of an apparent preference in some postcolonial scholarship for intellectual suggestion over rigour. The article is concerned with the type of interrogation of colonial knowledge claims that form one of the most well-established habits of postcolonial scholarship. However, Balagangadhara and Keppens go further than simply interrogating a colonial claim to knowledge. Hinduism and the caste system, they state that 'neither before nor after colonialism do such entities or phenomena exist' (Balagangadhara and Keppens 2009, 64). The means by which the article presents the current state of scholarship on caste and the manner in which their argument is situated within postcolonial scholarship is questionable. Only one scholar, Nicholas Dirks, is cited in the simplistic description of how the idea of caste was produced by 'the British...going-about with the Indians' (Balagangadhara and Keppens 2009, 64). Neither is the breadth of ideas and methodologies associated with the 'postcolonial' any more clearly defined. The bibliography of the article contains thirty-two references to a range of prominent texts, for example, by Sumit Sarkar, Arif Dirlik, Gyan Prakash, Leela Gandhi and Robert Young. However, there is little, if any, reference or even affinity between the tenor of this scholarship and the article's arguments. Only three specific references to authors other than Said and Balagangadhara are made in the body of the text. The authors' conclusions, that caste has no social reality in India, ranges very far from the interrogation of caste as a bureaucratic or scientific category employed by the colonial state. The statement made in the article that 'some postcolonial thinkers' believe that 'the British created Hinduism as a religion in India the way they created the Indian Civil Service' is not supported by a single reference to published work (nor could it be). Nowhere, beyond Balagangadhara's influence, is such a reductive and inappropriate comparison made, it is certainly not made by a single author listed in the article's bibliography, save by Balagangadhara himself. When contacted about the lack of specific evidence provided for such an extreme treatment of Indian history and, in particular, the corollary statements made about caste, the current editor of the journal, Robert Young, responded that the matter was one of editorial judgement and referencing convention; of 'whether every assertion an author makes should be referenced'.<sup>2</sup> This response is either innocent or indifferent to resonance of the argument being made. To extend an argument about the scientific, literary, political and social construction of racial and gender identities to claim that gender and race have, therefore, no social - or lived - reality would be politically intolerable. Arguably, if Balagangadhara and Keppens were

trading in categories more familiar to the western imagination, their article would never have made it into print, not least in a journal like *Interventions*.

According to Martin Fárez in his paper presented at the, 'Caste: Critiquing Colonial and Contemporary Constructions' conference organised by Prakash Shah in 2015, caste is nothing more than a 'cultural misunderstanding' created by colonialism and perpetuated by Western scholars and reproduced by Indian scholars entirely unaware of 'their own society' (Fárez 2015). In a 2015 article Balangadhara's students, Jakob de Roover and Sarah Claerhout, argue that no association between Hinduism and caste exists beyond the judgmental imagination of the western mind. The caste system, is 'an experiential entity internal to the cultural world of the West' that 'is not present in the way Indians experience their own society and practices' (de Roover and Claerhout 2015, 19). The argument accepts that 'injustice, violence, or discrimination between and among different jati's [sic]' existed in pre-colonial India though point is dropped without examination in order to build the argument that caste is entirely an invention of the 'Protestant-Christian' imagination, imposed in order to make sense of an apparently chaotic and repellent faith: Hinduism (de Roover and Claerhout 2015, 19).

The purported existence of the caste system is ascribed two significances. First, that it was, and remains, predicated on the inaccurate presumption of a singularised elite - the Brahmins - whose interests it served; and secondly, the employment of caste as a category has one, unambiguous, purpose: it is a 'damning moral assessment' of Indian society (de Roover and Claerhout, 2015, 15). The claim that a caste system exists, Balangadhara argues, is a concerted accusation of immorality made against India that has now been digested inside and outside of India. The hierarchies of caste, and its attendant corruptions, are 'a social order...[that]...makes immorality obligatory' (Balangadhara, Bloch and de Roover 2008, 13). To accept that caste exists as a principle of social organisation in India is to assert 'the absence of ethical thinking in the Indian traditions' and the fundamental immorality of any and all Hindus (Balangadhara, Bloch and de Roover 2008, 24).

Elaborations made of this central dogma has drawn rebuttals (Sharma 2017). In 2013, the work of scholars at the Centre for the Study of Local Cultures (CSLC) at Kuvempu University at Shimoga in Karnataka attracted rebuke after Balangadhara claimed that medieval Kannada Vachana literature does not contain significant criticisms of caste hierarchy (Chopra 2017, Gurukkal 2014). The centre was established in 2007, and funded by the Flemish Interuniversity Council, as a collaboration with Research Centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap. One of the aims of the centre was to support 'innovative research on local problems of caste/inequality and pluralism/conflict'.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion of this research appears to be the denial that caste ever really existed as a 'local problem'. Dunkin Jalki

has continued to pursue the argument that Vachana texts should be understood as primarily spiritual and that their interpretation as texts that criticise social hierarchy is a twentieth century distortion predicated on an understanding of India as being particularly beset by 'social problems' (Jalki 2018).

Balagangadhara's thesis on the non-existence of the caste system has found purchase, and amplification, in a UK-based debate about whether caste discrimination should be made part of the UK Equality Act of 2010 (Dhanda et al 2014, Dhanda 2017). The chief academic opponent of the inclusion of caste British legislation is Prakash Shah, a legal scholar at Queen Mary University in London, who has made extensive use of Balagangadhara's work. Shah has written extensively to identify the organisations who support the inclusion, and to question the ethnographic materials prepared to provide evidence for caste discrimination in the UK (Shah 2017, 2015). Under Balagangadhara's influence, Shah's argument has broadened from being a UK-specific socio-legal one to become a more general and absolute refutation of caste as the invention of colonial, and in particular Christian missionary, activity in South Asia. Following Balagangadhara, Shah claims that caste, both the word and the phenomenon it is purported to describe, dwell only within a colonial version of Indian society (Shah 2015, Fárek et al 2017).

These arguments are expanded and developed in a recent publication that marries the UK debate on anti-discrimination legislation with a more generalised argument about caste. *The Western Foundations of the Caste System*, edited by Martin Fárek, Dunkin Jalki, Sufiya Pathan and Prakash Shah, sets out to expose 'the Western and Christian roots of the so-called caste system' (Fárek et al, 2017). The book is a comprehensive refutation of the idea that 'caste' is a meaningful historical or sociological category. Different chapters of the book elide the vast field of scholarship on various versions, properties, contexts, histories and understandings that relate to 'caste'. The introduction fixes Balagangadhara's insights as the theoretical foundation, or rather the determining spirit, of the whole book. An unpublished ethnographic report by Balagangadhara on 'assumptions about the caste system' in Karnataka makes explicit their scepticism towards the existence of caste as a meaningful index of discrimination:

almost all the discussions about the 'caste system' refer to or narrate (i) stories of discrimination about water wells; (ii) physical beatings; (iii) denial of entry into the temples; and (iv) 'untouchability'. (It is not clear what the latter is about though.)...In discussions it is never clear whether (a) the above four aspects are the empirical properties of 'the caste system' or whether (b) they are the causal consequences of 'the caste system.' If they are empirical properties, we need to ascertain whether they are the constitutive properties of

the system or not. If they are constitutive properties, then the condemnation of ‘the caste system’ based on these properties could be justified. If they are, by contrast, secondary (or not necessary) properties, then the discussion will have to take an entirely different route. (quoted in Fárek et al 2017, 13-14).

The distinction made between ‘properties’ and ‘consequences’ is pure sophistry. The authors demand that the caste system displays the very purposeful, prescriptive solidity that he accuses others of, wrongly, assuming to exist. This demand for empirical certainty is echoed when the authors bemoan the absence of stable, empirical information about caste:

What is the basic unit of the caste system? Jati? Varna?  
What constitutes this basic unit? Employment/race/ethnicity/nationality?  
What are the fundamental properties of this basic unit?  
How are the units related to each other?  
Or what forms the organising principle of the ‘caste system’?  
How did this system come into being?  
What sustains it?  
How does it resist the relentless attempts to destroy it? What does this system serve to protect? (Fárek et al, 2017, 12)

In the absence of answers to these ‘foundational questions’, the authors argue, none of the scholarship that has amassed on caste can be considered anything other than evidence of the continuation of colonial consciousness (Fárek et al 2017, 19). The writings of the Ghent School repeat *ad nauseam* a common rhetorical formula. Having described what is purported to be the dominant view of a particular category, they question the evidence that exists to support its absolute, undeniable existence in the specific form in which it has been described. The Ghent School demand evidence of a non-contextual existence for a set of phenomena that all critical scholars have laboured to argue can only be properly understood *in* specific contexts. Lacking evidence that caste has a single, supra-definition that can apply in any and all contexts, the Ghent School argue that caste must be something else; that something else being a malignant figment of the western imagination that is animated by opportunistic purveyors of ‘identity politics’. Jacob De Roover’s novel spin on the usual argument proposes that caste is nothing more than a projection of European, anti-Semitic preoccupations.

Since there is no political or religious authority that imposes explicit caste laws, it must concern violation of a different kind of rule: the kind that states moral obligations. In other

words, according to the dominant discourse about caste, these odious practices must be manifestations of the principles that constitute the caste system. As Balagangadhara ... argues, this discourse implies that 'the caste system is an immoral social order twice over: not only does the practice of caste discrimination violate certain moral norms but also, as a social order, it makes immorality obligatory.' Caste is a brutal mode of hierarchical social organization because its rules compel people to act in inhumane ways. This is the moral dimension of the dominant discourse about the caste system: it is viewed as a social organization that transforms immorality into a duty by representing its practices as moral obligations, even though they are immoral. This characterization of the caste system is inherently implausible, Balagangadhara points out. (de Roover 2017, 175)

De Roover's argument is perfectly circular. The description of caste recounted for the purposing of stressing its implausibility is Balagangadhara's alone.

The certainties sought by each chapter of the book create two reductive distortions of the fields of scholarship concerned with caste: that either scholars regard caste as the basis of a rigid and prescriptive system of oppression or that they endow it with a flexibility that renders it non-existent. The various disciplines that concern themselves with aspects of what is collectively, and very broadly defined as 'caste' – politics, sociology, anthropology, literature, law and history – would generally not recognise the Ghent School's emphatic definitions and dogmatic questions as being particularly useful or important. One of the authors whose work is used to substantiate the non-existence of caste is Padmanabh Samarendra, Associate Professor at the Dr K.R. Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. Padmanabh's research examines the political and social responses to caste as a category employed by the colonial state and questions the dominant and idiomatic formulae used to describe political, social and cultural configurations of caste (Samarendra 2011). At no point, however, does his work suggest that the patterns of discrimination or privilege associated with ranked, hierarchical identity are simply fictions concocted to malign India. To employ his work in the manner that the authors of *The Western Foundations* do is either an act of dishonesty or incomprehension.

Balagangadhara's questioning of the existence of caste as an axis of social violence is developed by a chapter in *The Western Foundations* by Dunkin Jalki and Sufiya Patha, who argue that caste-based violence is, in fact, 'an inherited narrative' that exists as an *a priori* claim but which has no reference to provable or measurable realities (Jalki and Patha, 2017, 69). Caste atrocities, in other words, are a politicisation of violence that has occurred for some other reason. In a connected vein of argument, de Roover and Claerhout describe the 'shrill moral tone' that characterises discussions of caste

inequality as the direct descendent of a judgemental Christian intervention in a pre-supposed violence rather than the result of any observable reality (de Roover and Claerhout 2015, 19).

### **The Ghent School and Hindu Nationalism**

The Ghent School's self-marginalisation from a supposedly monolithic, intellectual orthodoxy raises the question of the alignment between this work and the politics of Hindu nationalism, as does Balagangadhara's casual reference in 2006 to 'Islamic colonial rule' in India (Balagangadhara, 2006). The late-Anthony Copley commented in a review of *Rethinking Religion in India: the Colonial Construction of India* (2009) that the, '[o]ne positive gain from this mainly negative study is that it pulls the rug from underneath the Hindutva project: if there is no Hinduism, it has no *raison d'être*' (Copley, 2012). This conclusion is both logical and sensible; its implications should separate the Ghent School from any politics that relies on colonial understandings of Hinduism and Hindus as meaningful categories. Hindu religious nationalism relies upon a mythological Indian past which calls Hindus to recognise and cohere themselves as a beleaguered majority, whose cultural and physical prowess had been affronted and eroded by successive waves of invasion (Sarkar et al 1993, Nandy et al 1995, van der Veer 1992). However, instead of critiquing the derivative categories and defensive politics of Hindu nationalism, the Ghent School shares and broadens this sense of affront to include a sensitivity to the insults apparently offered by mainstream, university-based scholarship, inside and beyond India (Sharma 2017).

This siege mentality affords license for extravagance and generalisation. In a review of Vamsee Juluri's *Rearming Hinduism: Nature, Hinduphobia, and the Return of Indian Intelligence* de Roover questions the aptness of the term 'Hinduphobia' but describes Doniger's work as

a bad case of Cold War social science, the ideological enterprise launched by U.S. universities in the postwar period. This type of writing hides propaganda for the American ideology of freedom under the cloak of 'progressive' scholarship. It systematically depicts non-Western societies as dens of tyranny and patriarchy and then purports the aim of saving the 'oppressed' groups and 'liberal' strands in a society from its dominant culture (de Roover 2016, 376).

Doniger's work is characterised as one expression of a broader, western desire to interfere in India on the pretext of advocacy for a marginalised group. That pretext – the 'oppression' is placed by de Roover in inverted commas – is a western fantasy, manipulated as a means to either extend western dominance over India from without or to destabilise from within. The Ghent School espouse a mirror

dogma. They identify, all around themselves, a field of academic scholarship unified by 'colonial consciousness' and motivated by a cultural tradition defamation (of Hindu India).

The encouragement of simple, unequivocal truths that are underwritten by accusations of conspiracy resonate well on social media platforms and find amplification in popular politics. Lal has discussed the emergence in diasporic contexts, and in particular in the US, of simplified and muscular upper-caste Hindu politics. This politics finds potent and popular articulation in 'cyber-diasporic Hindu Militancy'; the use of websites and, since Lal wrote, social media to propagate an aggressive politics of grievance (Lal 1999, 152). Prakash Shah's blog ([aryalegal.wordpress.com](http://aryalegal.wordpress.com)) and twitter account (@aryalegal) contain unequivocal statements about the marginalisation of both Hindus generally and his work specifically. 'Journalists won't be interested', he wrote on twitter on 19 January 2017, 'but our book demolishes propaganda on caste system'. Shah announced the publication of *The Western Foundations of the Caste System* with the tweet: 'Caste system doctrine creation of missionaries. No caste system in India' (@aryalegal 17 July 2017). The defensive argument of defamation is repetitive but elastic; it can stretch to encompass any and all representations of India that find ill-favour. An article written in 2015 by three researchers from Ghent simultaneously invented and protested the designation of India as 'Rapeistan'. Balagangadhara's work is cited to connect two conspiracies: 'India's "rape culture" and "caste-ridden" society' (Raghuvanshy, Keppens and Rao, 2015). This article was re-tweeted and endorsed by Prakash Shah after widespread protests in India following both the involvement of officials in two cases of sexual violence in 2017 and 2018 (@aryalegal 22 April 2018).

### **Caste and Hindutva in India**

The emergence of caste as a conspicuous aspect in the work of the Ghent School takes place at a time when social, devotional, political and economic manifestations of caste identity are the subjects of charged public debate in India. The relationship between the Bharatiya Janata Party, who currently hold power in central government, and low-caste politics is complex and, since the start of 2018, fractious. In its 2014 electoral campaign, the BJP stood on a platform of development, promising to unlock the nation's capacity for inclusive wealth regardless of caste, community or connections. From the late-1990s, the BJP courted alliances with communities categorised as 'Other Backward Castes', groups that were asserting their rights to the revised reservations created by the implementation of the Mandal Commission in 1990 (Jaffrelot 2008). At the time, commentators speculated that the combination of this rhetoric and local alliances between the BJP and low-caste activists had decreased the electoral significance of vote banks organised by caste (Desai and Roy, 2016).

Once in power, the BJP made conspicuous attempts to commemorate Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956), one of the twentieth century's most prominent campaigners against caste oppression, critic of Gandhi and architect of the republic's constitutional provision of caste reservation. In 2015, the purchase was finalised of the house on 10 King Henry's Road in North West London where Ambedkar had lived as a student. Substantial investment has been made to choreograph public and symbolic associations between the BJP and Ambedkar. At the end of 2017, the Dr. Ambedkar International Centre was opened by the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, on Janpath in New Delhi. A few months later, at an equally prestigious address in Civil Lines, the Ambedkar Memorial was inaugurated, again by the Prime Minister. This attempt to affiliate Ambedkar with Hindu nationalism depends upon selective and significant omissions. For example, the recent, government-sponsored Hindi translations of his publications exclude *The Annihilation of Caste* and *Riddles in Hinduism*. Reservation has been extended to dalits who had converted to Buddhism and Sikhism but not Christianity or Islam and the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh insists on using Ambedkar's father's name, Ramji, a name Ambedkar did not use, in all official references to him (Gorringer and Waghmore 2018, Nair, 2018, Samendra 2016).

Beyond the BJP's selective solicitousness, fundamental frictions exist between Hindu nationalist and dalit politics. BJP advocacy of cow protection creates a clear field of antagonism between Gauraksha piety and the embedded economies of low-status labour in the removal and processing of cattle carcasses. In January 2018 violence broke out in Bhima Koregaon during celebrations that marked the 200-year anniversary of the British-led, low-caste Mahar army's victory against the Peshwar in 1818. Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote, regionally prominent Hindu nationalists, were accused of inciting anti-dalit violence in which one man was killed.

The most profound rupture in the BJP's symbolic overtures to low-caste politics took place in March 2018, when the Supreme Court introduced changes to the operation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, sparking riots across India and the orchestration of the Bharat Bandh, a national day of dalit protest on 2 April. At the inauguration the Ambedkar Memorial eleven days later, Narendra Modi emphasised his government's commitment to offering both justice and opportunities to dalits, a rhetorical recognition of both systemic oppression and sporadic violence of the kind the Ghent School claim does not exist. In the aftermath of the protests, the *Indian Express* reported on 9 April that the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, made a measured condemnation of the 'problem' of caste. Adityanath called for the elimination of both caste and untouchability albeit in terms that emphasised the defensive necessity of Hindu unity: 'If we were not divided on caste lines, Somnath temple could not have been demolished'.

Adityanath condemns caste as a practise that weakened Hinduism to make it vulnerable to (Muslim) incursions though his rhetoric leaves as moot the question of whether caste divisions originate within or outside of Hindu society.

The Ghent School's circular reasoning and crude generalisations have no purchase in the BJP's endeavours to maintain, however uneasily, some façade of commitment to low-caste activism. In his own writings Balagangadhara has made clear his disregard for Ambedkar as an intellectual, politician or icon. Ambedkar's reservations, he argues, have created a culture of 'criminality, incompetence and sycophancy' in Indian universities (Balagangadhara 2015). The *Deccan Herald* and *The Hindu* reported on protests provoked by remarks made by Balagangadhara at a conference entitled, 'The Enigma of Law' in which he described Ambedkar as an 'eccentric fool' and dalit literature as 'bullshit' (Sharma, 2017, Veerendra P.M. 2015).

The very recent history of the relationship between a national government and caste-based identities underlines the complexity and variety through which the politics of caste has been asserted in the twentieth and twenty-first century (Rao 2009). There is, however, no reason to believe that the structure of Indian society has been any more or less complex, or subject to varied interpretations, in the preceding centuries. The allure of 'colonial consciousness' is that it offers a hinge that articulates, and differentiates, an authentic past and a present troubled by external interference. What the concept does not do, indeed what it is specifically designed to side-step, is a meaningful conversation about the nature of social structures however they are articulated or contested. Prakash Shah's simplistic assertions - 'there is no caste system' - cannot map in any meaningful way onto contemporary Indian politics or society (@aryalegal 29 March 2018). Those comments belong in contexts in which the parameters of debate can be simplified, and reduced, to a western 'them' versus a Hindu 'us'. This argument possesses its greatest currency in two, co-dependent contexts. First, outside India in situations in which advocates can claim to speak on behalf of all Hindus and for Hinduism, and second, in the confines of polemical and marginalised scholarship.

## **Conclusion**

The Ghent School, despite the proliferation and verbosity of its publications, takes readers on a tiny circumambulation of a simple, central dogma. 'Colonial consciousness', a simplified Orientalism redux, is used to create a flimsy, populist impression of a liberal scholarly orthodoxy that is arrayed against the recovery of a more authentic version of a Hindu Indian society. 'Colonial consciousness' is also used to delineate a conspiracy of defamation against Hinduism that simultaneously obscures

and precludes the recovery a more authentic Hindu selfhood. The marginalisation cultivated by Balangadhara and his acolytes, as beleaguered truth tellers, is an attempt to generate a landscape of scholarship in its own image: aphoristic, polemical and hateful.

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<sup>1</sup> A very different version of this paper was presented at the British Association of South Asian Studies Conference in Nottingham in 2017. I would like to thank my co-panellist, Shalini Sharma, discussant, Ed Anderson, the two anonymous reviewers and John Zavos for their insights and suggestions.

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