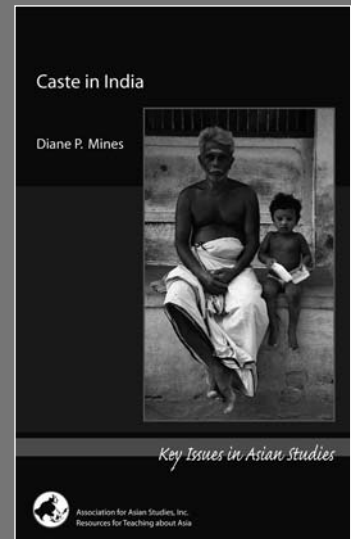


Caste in India



DIANE P. MINES is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. She is the author of *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village* (2005). She has co-edited two books, *Everyday Life in South Asia* with Sarah Lamb (2002 with a second edition due in 2010), and the forthcoming *Do Villages Matter?* with co-editor Nicolas Yazgi (2010). She has conducted anthropological research in India for over twenty years and is currently studying South Indian concepts of landscape and environment. She received her PhD from the University of Chicago.



Lucien: *What are some reasons you decided to write a Key Issues in Asian Studies booklet on caste in India?*

Diane Mines: Three reasons, I suppose. First, caste is both one of the most well known, and one of the most poorly understood, social phenomena that I can think of. Students in my classes always know *something* about caste, but what they know is usually inaccurate—either partial, outdated, or erroneous—sometimes all three. These misunderstandings are not their fault. A quick scan of social science textbooks at the high school and college level reveals the sources of their misunderstandings. Caste is such a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that no brief explanation, of the kind general textbooks provide, can paint an accurate picture. To get a rich understanding of caste, you have to see how it operates in different contexts (agricultural systems, marriage, daily life, or politics), and see how it has changed historically, through colonialism, nationalism, Indian law, and contemporary practices.

Second, caste is an extremely important and current source of discussion and debate in India today. Right now, one of the most riveting social debates taking place in India concerns the modern “reservation system,” which is an affirmative action program written into the Indian constitution. In this reservation system, a certain quota of government jobs, as well as admissions to universities and graduate schools, are “reserved” for caste groups who are judged to have been historically discriminated against. These include what many Westerners would still know as “untouchables”—now called by the government “Scheduled Castes”—and “Other Backward Castes.” In the 1980s, a special governmental commission, called the Mandal Commission, updated recommendations for caste reservations to nearly fifty percent of government jobs and university admissions. Attempts to implement these recommendations have led to protests and sporadic violence, and opened up a society-wide debate about the relevance of caste in India

today. In short, to write about caste is to write about something that Indians themselves care about a great deal.

Third, I thought that writing a booklet about caste would help me organize some of its complexities in a way that would aid both my understanding and my teaching. Students are almost always very interested in caste, but organizing lectures on the subject in a way that reflects the complexity of the phenomenon without overwhelming students is a challenge. I thought that writing the booklet would help me figure out a way to make my ideas and interpretations more clear.

Lucien: *What did you learn as you developed this work of pedagogical scholarship intended for broad audiences?*

Diane Mines: I’ve learned a lot! More than I thought I would. In particular, I was excited to learn more about how caste was changed—constructed really—through British colonial policy and through the Indian nationalist movement. It was very interesting to have a chance to explore in more depth how the famous Mahatma Gandhi was criticized by many other politicians of his time for his relative defense of caste as a mode of organizing society. While Gandhi argued against ranking people according to caste, and chided Hindus for considering some people to be “untouchable,” he never suggested abolishing caste at all. Others, for example the untouchable leader B.R. Ambedkar, disagreed vehemently and saw real legal and political reform as the only way to eventually work towards abolishing caste in India. Debates about how caste should be defined or addressed by the constitution of independent India, and the subsequent debates about the reservation system, were something I knew little about. Writing on these topics really changed how I think about caste in India today.

Lucien: *How will teachers and students in other academic disciplines, besides anthropology, benefit from your booklet?*

Diane Mines: Students are almost always very interested in caste. Whenever I give a lecture on the subject, students pepper me with

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questions beyond the final bell and even bring questions with them to subsequent classes. Of course, one of the reasons that it rivets them so is that, to them, it seems so clearly unjust. However, I think that they also like how learning about caste challenges them to think about the injustices that we sometimes perpetuate, too, such as inequalities of class and race. Caste provides an excellent contrast medium for seeing more objectively and thinking more closely about the social distinctions that exist in our own society. Caste, class, and race are not the same things, but they intersect and overlap in interesting ways.

With that in mind, I think that the booklet would appeal to students and teachers in a wide variety of subjects, from the social sciences to the humanities. It invites readers to think comparatively and to reflect on their own action in the world, even as they learn about something that, on the face of it, seems so different. I am an anthropologist, and like a lot of anthropology, the booklet is written in an interdisciplinary tone, and takes into account historical, economic, religious, social, and humanistic issues, as well as real-life accounts from my own long-term research on caste in India. The booklet brings the discussion of caste down to the ground, as we look at actual people enacting caste in everyday life, and it gives a more general overview of the subject from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Finally, the book is written for the general reader. I avoided jargon (with the help of the editor!) and wrote to communicate clearly. This past April, just after finishing the manuscript, my seventeen-year-old twin nieces happened to ask me if I ever thought of writing something for high school students—something interesting about my work in India that they could read. I told them I had just written something like that on caste. They said, “Cool.”

Lucien: *Diane, thanks for the interview!* ■

Caste in India

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“Diane Mines has produced a clear and compelling introduction to one of the world’s most complex and misunderstood social systems. This booklet offers an exhaustive overview of the anthropology and history of caste based on extensive reading and over two decades of ethnographic research in rural South India. It also speaks to the wider political and economic dimensions of caste as it is lived and debated in India today. *Caste in India* will be a most welcome addition to introductory courses in anthropology, history, sociology, human geography, and political science.”

Bernard Bate
Associate Professor in Anthropology
Yale University

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