

A 14-PART INVESTIGATION

THE RESERVATION FILES

PART FOUR

1,000 YEARS OF OUTSIDERS

Did the invaders bring caste? A claim you have definitely heard, tested properly – and the answer nobody wants.

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The Part With No Safe Side

Every part of this series has annoyed somebody. This one is going to annoy everybody, and I want to explain why before you start.

The question here is simple to ask: did caste as we know it come from outside? From the Turks, the Sultans, the Mughals, the Portuguese, the British? Or was it ours all along?

It has become one of the loudest arguments in Indian public life, and it is usually conducted with almost no evidence at all — because the evidence is inconvenient for every position anyone actually holds.

"Every group in this argument turns out to have caste inside it. That single fact does more damage to more theories than anything else in this series."

Here is what I found, and I will say it up front so you can decide whether to keep reading.

The claim that outsiders *brought* caste fails, and it fails on a date. But the claim that caste is a purely Hindu problem also fails — because caste survived conversion into Islam, into Christianity, and into Sikhism, three religions whose founding texts explicitly reject birth-based rank. It is inside all of them, in India, today.

That second finding is the harder one, and I have given it three full chapters rather than a paragraph, because it is usually mentioned as a debating point and then dropped. There are tens of millions of Indians living inside it.

It also leads to the most under-reported fact in the entire reservation argument, which is Chapter 7. A Dalit who converts to Buddhism keeps their Scheduled Caste status. A Dalit who converts to Sikhism keeps it. A Dalit who converts to Islam or Christianity loses it — by a Presidential Order from 1950 that is still in force in 2026. I did not know that when I started. Very few people do.

One more thing. Chapter 8 is the poetry of India's own abolitionists — Kabir, Ravidas, Nanak, Basava, Chokhamela. It is the part I most enjoyed writing. Whatever your position, those people fought this fight in Indian languages, on Indian ground, centuries before anyone had heard of a reservation policy.

— Lovepreet Singh

July 2026

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The Two Claims

Two very popular arguments, written the way their best defenders write them. Then a method for actually testing them.

This part exists to test two specific claims. They are opposites, they are both extremely popular, and almost nobody who makes either one has checked it.

CLAIM A — STEELMANNED

"Caste as we know it was brought or hardened by outsiders."

Indian society before the invasions shows real fluidity. Varna in the earliest texts is a scheme of function, not a prison. Movement between groups is recorded. The system that colonial and modern writers describe — rigid, humiliating, obsessed with pollution — is a late thing.

What happened in between was a thousand years of foreign rule. Conquest produced insecurity, and insecure societies close ranks. Communities pulled inward to protect their women, their property and their rituals. Rules that had been guidelines became walls.

Then the British finished the job. They counted caste, ranked it, printed it in census volumes, and turned fluid local identities into fixed legal categories with entitlements attached.

So the ugliest features of caste are a defensive scar tissue, formed under a millennium of pressure from outside. Blaming the original tradition for its wartime deformation is like blaming a man for his limp instead of the person who broke his leg.

CLAIM B — STEELMANNED

"Caste is a Hindu institution, and pointing elsewhere is deflection."

The four-varna scheme is in Hindu scripture. The Dharmashastras are Hindu law books. The rules about pollution and touch are enforced by ritual concepts that are Hindu in origin. Untouchability was justified by karma and rebirth — Hindu doctrines.

No other society on earth produced this specific structure. Hierarchies existed everywhere; a hereditary, endogamous, ritually-graded order sanctified by religion and lasting two thousand years appeared once, here.

And the "outsiders did it" argument has a suspicious convenience. It arrives exactly when a tradition is asked to account for something shameful, and it always names a group that is currently a political target. That is not history. That is an alibi.

How to test them

Both claims make predictions. That is what makes them testable.

WHAT EACH CLAIM PREDICTS – AND WHERE TO LOOK

Claim	If true, we should find...	Where to look
A – outsiders brought or hardened it	Caste absent or mild before the invasions; hardening visible after	Foreign eyewitness accounts from before 1206 – Chapter 2
A – outsiders brought or hardened it	Caste weak or absent among Indian Muslims and Christians	Chapters 4, 5, 6
B – it is a Hindu institution	Caste confined to Hindus; conversion an exit	Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7
B – it is a Hindu institution	Opposition to caste coming from outside the tradition	Chapter 8

Notice that Claim A and Claim B make *the same prediction* about Indian Muslims and Christians, for opposite reasons. Both expect caste to weaken outside Hinduism.

That is the single best test available, and it is the heart of this book.

The Witnesses From Before

Foreigners who visited India and wrote down what they saw — long before any Sultan reached Delhi.

The "invaders brought it" claim has a date problem, and this chapter is the date problem.

The Delhi Sultanate was established in **1206**. Any claim that Islamic rule created or hardened caste requires caste to have been absent, or mild, before then.

So the useful evidence is not Hindu texts — a defender can always argue those are prescriptive rather than descriptive. The useful evidence is **foreign observers**: people with no stake in Indian religion, describing what they actually saw.

We have several. Here is the most important.

Al-Biruni, around 1030 CE

Abu Rayhan al-Biruni was a Persian scholar who came to India with Mahmud of Ghazni's campaigns, learned Sanskrit, read Indian texts, and wrote *Kitab al-Hind* — one of the most careful descriptions of a foreign society produced anywhere in the medieval world.

He was a Muslim, an outsider, and writing **almost two centuries before the Delhi Sultanate existed**.

■ FACT

Al-Biruni described the full system, including untouchability, around 1030 CE.

He recorded the four varnas and their origin from the body of the primordial being — the Purusha Sukta account.

He described the **Antyaja**: eight groups born outside the fourfold order, segregated by occupation — fuller, shoemaker, juggler, basket and shield maker, sailor, fisherman, hunter, weaver — who **did not live with the rest of the community** but on the outskirts of towns and villages.

And he recorded groups below even those — Chandala, Doma, Hadi and others — instructed to live outside the villages and to clean the villages' filth.

Read that again with the dates in mind. A Muslim scholar, writing before Muslim rule in India, describes: hereditary ranked groups, residential segregation, degrading assigned work, and a category of people placed outside the system entirely.

Every feature of caste that the "invaders brought it" argument attributes to invaders was written down by a foreigner before the invaders arrived.

And he was not the first

- ▶ **Megasthenes, around 300 BCE.** A Greek ambassador at the Mauryan court. His account of India describes the population as divided into hereditary groups who may not marry outside them or change occupation. His categories do not match the four varnas neatly — which is itself interesting, and fits the argument in Part 3 that jati was always the reality — but hereditary, endogamous, occupation-bound groups are there, thirteen hundred years before Al-Biruni.
- ▶ **Fa-Hien, around 400 CE.** A Chinese Buddhist pilgrim. He records that Chandalas lived apart from other people and were required to strike a piece of wood to announce themselves when entering a town, so that others could avoid them.
- ▶ **Xuanzang, around 630 CE.** Another Chinese pilgrim, who travelled widely under Harsha. He describes the four hereditary orders, notes that marriage across them does not occur, and records butchers, scavengers and executioners living outside the city walls with their dwellings marked.

■ FACT

Four independent foreign observers, across roughly 1,300 years, all before Islamic rule.

A Greek diplomat, two Chinese Buddhist monks and a Persian Muslim scholar. Different centuries, different religions, different languages, no contact with one another, no stake in Indian theology.

All four describe hereditary groups, restricted marriage, inherited occupation, and — from Fa-Hien onward — people required to live apart and signal their approach so others could avoid contact.

■ INTERPRETATION

What this settles, and what it does not.

It settles the strong version of Claim A. Caste, including untouchability in a recognisable form, is documented by neutral outside witnesses before 1206. Nobody brought it. It was here.

It does not settle the weak version. "Outsiders hardened an existing system" is a completely different claim, and Chapter 3 and Part 5 test it seriously. A system can be real in 1030 and considerably worse by 1830.

This distinction gets lost constantly. When someone says "the British created caste," the reply is not "no, caste is eternal" — it is "the British found this and did specific documented things to it." Which things, and how much they mattered, is Part 5.

What The Sultans And Mughals Actually Changed

Six hundred years of Muslim rule over most of India. Here is what it did to caste – and what it left completely alone.

From 1206 to 1857, large parts of India were ruled by Muslim dynasties – the Delhi Sultanate, then the Mughals, alongside regional sultanates and, for long stretches, powerful Hindu kingdoms.

If a foreign ruling religion that formally rejects birth-based hierarchy governs a caste society for six centuries, something should happen. Something did – just not what either side expects.

What did not change

■ FACT

Muslim rulers governed through the existing social structure, not against it.

Land revenue – the whole basis of the state – was collected through **zamindars** and local intermediaries who were overwhelmingly drawn from existing dominant landholding communities. Villages continued to operate through hereditary service relationships. Local disputes continued to be settled by caste councils.

A pre-modern empire needs revenue and order. It does not need social reform, and reorganising village society would have threatened both.

Some rulers did recruit talent without regard to birth, and some Hindu communities rose substantially in the Mughal administration. But recruiting a few thousand officials is not the same as touching the marriage rules of a hundred million villagers, and nobody tried.

What did change

- ▶ **A new elite appeared above everyone.** A Persianate court culture, with its own languages and its own status markers, sat on top of the existing hierarchy without dissolving it.
- ▶ **New occupational groups formed.** Urban crafts, paper-making, particular textile trades, and military service expanded, and – this is the key part – the new groups organised themselves in the familiar way, as endogamous communities with inherited trades.

- **Conversion happened — mostly in groups.** This is the mechanism that explains everything in the next three chapters, and it deserves its own box.

■ FACT

Conversion in India was usually collective, not individual — so the caste unit survived it.

People did not generally convert one by one. Whole occupational communities converted together: a weaving community, a group of oil-pressers, a fishing community.

And a community that converts together *stays a community*. It keeps its trade, its neighbourhood, its internal marriage circle and its position relative to the groups around it. The religion changed. The jati did not.

This single mechanism explains why caste is present inside Indian Islam and Indian Christianity today. It was never removed. It walked through the door with the converts.

The detail that ends the debate about whether Islam "resisted" caste in India

In the fourteenth century, a Muslim historian and political theorist at the Delhi Sultanate court named **Ziauddin Barani** wrote a treatise on statecraft, the *Fatawa-i-Jahandari*.

In it he argued, at length, that high offices and education should be restricted to the well-born, and that the low-born should be kept out of both — that teaching them was actively dangerous to the social order.

■ INTERPRETATION

Read what that means carefully.

A Muslim scholar, in a Muslim court, in a religion whose founding texts state that no Arab is superior to a non-Arab and that all believers are brothers, produced a systematic argument for hereditary rank — and did so within a century and a half of the Sultanate's founding.

He was not importing Hindu doctrine. He was rationalising the society he lived in, using the categories that society ran on.

That is what makes this fact so useful. It shows the transmission working in the direction nobody argues about: not caste being brought in from outside, but the newcomers absorbing the logic of the place they had arrived in.

■ CONTESTED CLAIM — MADE BY BOTH SIDES

"Muslim rule destroyed the caste system" / "Muslim rule made caste worse."

Neither survives the evidence. The first is contradicted by the persistence of caste in every region under the longest Muslim rule, and by the presence of caste inside Indian Islam. The second requires showing that caste was measurably milder in 1200 than in 1700, and no such demonstration exists — Al-Biruni's description from 1030 is already recognisably the full system.

The accurate statement is duller: six centuries of Muslim rule left the structure of Indian society largely intact, added a new elite layer on top of it, and were themselves partly absorbed into its logic.

Caste Inside Indian Islam

A religion founded on the explicit rejection of birth rank. Around two hundred million followers in India. And a hierarchy running through all of it.

Islam has no theology of caste. Its founding texts are emphatic on the point: no Arab is superior to a non-Arab except by piety; the believers are brothers. Prayer in a mosque is performed shoulder to shoulder in lines, which is itself a statement.

And Indian Muslim society has a caste structure.

The three tiers

■ FACT

The Sachar Committee, a Government of India body, documented caste among Indian Muslims.

The Committee's 2006 report used a threefold division:

Ashraf — the "noble." Those claiming descent from foreign lands — Sayyid, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan — or from upper-caste Hindu converts.

Ajlaf — middle-ranking converts from occupations regarded as ritually clean. Weavers, oil-pressers, tailors, butchers, cultivators.

Arzal — those who converted from communities formerly treated as untouchable. The same occupations, the same position at the bottom.

The report stated directly that features of the Hindu caste system — hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy, and hereditary occupation — are also present among Indian Muslims.

Note where the tiers come from. They are not Islamic categories. They are the *previous position of the community before it converted*, carried across intact.

What it looks like in practice

- ▶ **Marriage.** Indian Muslim marriage runs overwhelmingly within *biradari* — the community of equivalent status. A Sayyid family marrying into a family of former untouchable status is about as common as the Hindu equivalent.

- ▶ **Occupation.** The traditional trade frequently persists across generations, exactly as before.
- ▶ **Space.** In parts of India, separate mosques and separate burial grounds by community have been documented and disputed in court.
- ▶ **Power.** Leadership of Muslim religious and political institutions has historically been drawn disproportionately from the Ashraf.

The Pasmanda movement

Pasmanda is a Persian word meaning "those left behind." It has become the umbrella identity for backward, Dalit and tribal Muslims organising against caste discrimination *within* their own community.

■ FACT

The numbers are large and disputed — and both estimates make the same point.

The Sachar Committee put OBC and SC/ST Muslims at around **40%** of Indian Muslims (2004–05 data). Pasmanda activists and scholars argue the true figure is **80–85%**.

The gap between those numbers is itself an argument about who counts as backward. But even the lower official figure means tens of millions of Indian Muslims are classified as backward on grounds that are, in origin, caste grounds.

■ INTERPRETATION

What this does to both claims from Chapter 1.

It destroys Claim A. If Muslim rule brought caste to India, the one community that should be free of it is the Muslim community. It is not. The hierarchy inside Indian Islam maps almost exactly onto the pre-conversion caste positions of the communities that converted.

It badly damages Claim B. If caste were purely a Hindu religious institution, leaving Hinduism should end it. It does not. Conversion changed the theology and left the social structure untouched.

The conclusion both sides avoid: **caste in India is a social structure that religions pass through, not a doctrine that any one religion owns.**

A NOTE ON HOW THIS FACT GETS USED

This chapter is regularly deployed as a debating weapon — "look, they have it too, so stop blaming us." That use is worth resisting.

Caste among Indian Muslims is not a point that scores against anyone. It is a description of the lives of tens of millions of people who are near the bottom of two hierarchies at once, and who have been organising against it for decades with very little attention from anybody. Chapter 7 shows what the Indian state has done to them.

Caste Inside Indian Christianity

Missionaries came to India offering equality before God. Then they built separate pews.

Christianity in India is old — considerably older than in most of Europe. Communities in Kerala trace their origins to the first centuries CE. Large-scale conversion in the south and among Adivasi communities came much later, under Portuguese and then British missions.

The offer was explicit: in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. Many of the people who accepted it were from communities treated as untouchable, and they accepted it precisely because of that offer.

What actually happened

■ FACT

Caste practices were carried into Indian churches and, in places, persist.

Documented and litigated practices in various parts of India have included separate seating within the same church, separate queues for communion, separate cemeteries or separately walled sections of the same cemetery, separate hearses, and separate feast-day processions.

Kerala's ancient Syrian Christian communities have historically occupied a high social position and have been largely endogamous, marrying among themselves rather than with Christians of Dalit origin.

Church leadership has historically been drawn disproportionately from converts of higher-caste origin, a grievance that Dalit Christian organisations have pressed for decades.

The pattern is the same as Chapter 4, for the same reason. Communities converted as communities. They arrived with their marriage circles and their relative standing, and the church did not disassemble them — in several periods it accommodated them, on the reasoning that insisting on integration would stop higher-caste conversions.

Two religions, both founded on the rejection of birth rank, both entered India, and in both the rank survived the conversion. The variable is not the theology. It is the country.

■ INTERPRETATION

The uncomfortable question this raises for the anti-caste movement.

Conversion has been, for two centuries, one of the principal escape routes recommended to Dalits — by missionaries, by reformers, and most famously by Ambedkar himself, who converted to Buddhism in 1956 with hundreds of thousands of followers.

The evidence from Islam and Christianity suggests that conversion changes what you believe and does very little to change how others treat you, because the mechanism holding caste in place — who marries whom, and what the neighbours think — is not a religious mechanism.

Ambedkar's own choice is worth noting here. He rejected both Islam and Christianity as destinations, partly on the grounds that converts to those faiths in India had not escaped caste. He chose Buddhism instead. Whether that worked is a fair question, and Part 11 has the data.

Caste Inside Sikhism

No religion attacked caste harder or more practically. This is the strongest test case in the book — and the most sobering.

If any tradition should have broken caste, it is this one. Sikhism did not merely disapprove of it in principle. It built institutions specifically designed to destroy it.

What was actually built

- ▶ **Langar.** The community kitchen, where everyone sits on the floor in rows and eats the same food, together. Consider what this attacks: the commensality wall from Part 3 — the daily, visible, three-times-a-day performance of rank. Guru Nanak aimed directly at the mechanism, not the theory.
- ▶ **The common surname.** Singh and Kaur, adopted by all, dissolving the caste identifier carried in a name.
- ▶ **Scripture by the low-born.** The Guru Granth Sahib includes the compositions of Ravidas, a leather-worker; Kabir, a weaver; Namdev, a tailor; Sadhna, a butcher; Sain, a barber. A scripture that treats the words of such men as divine revelation is a direct doctrinal assault on the entire ranking.
- ▶ **The Khalsa.** Initiation from a common bowl, deliberately dissolving distinctions of birth.

This is not a mild reformist gesture. It is the most sustained institutional attack on caste that any Indian tradition mounted.

And what happened

■ FACT

Caste identities persist among Sikhs.

Sikh society in Punjab is widely described in terms of caste groupings — Jat Sikhs, historically the dominant landowning community; Khatri and Arora, traditionally trading communities; Ramgarhia, from artisan backgrounds; and **Mazhabi** and **Ravidasia** Sikhs, from communities formerly treated as untouchable.

Marriage remains substantially within these groupings. Separate gurdwaras associated with particular communities exist in many villages and towns in Punjab and in the diaspora. Disputes over access to gurdwara management and to village cremation grounds have produced litigation and, in some cases, violence.

Punjab has among the highest proportions of Scheduled Caste population of any Indian state — a fact that sits oddly beside the theology.

■ INTERPRETATION

This is the most important chapter in Part 4, and here is why.

Islam and Christianity arrived from outside. A defender can always argue that they were foreign transplants that never reached deep enough to reorganise village life.

Sikhism cannot be dismissed that way. It was born in Punjab, in Punjabi, addressing Punjabis, with institutions purpose-built to break the exact mechanisms that sustain caste. It had state power under Ranjit Singh. It had mass adherence. It had everything.

And caste is still there.

What follows is uncomfortable for everyone: caste is not held in place by belief. Belief was changed — thoroughly, sincerely, at scale, by millions of people — and the structure survived the change.

Which means it is held in place by something else: land, marriage, and what the neighbours do. Part 3 called that the lock. This chapter is the experimental proof.

AND THE HOPEFUL READING, WHICH IS ALSO TRUE

None of the above means the effort failed. Langar is served to millions of people of every background every single day, in India and around the world, and it is one of the largest sustained acts of practical equality anywhere on earth.

A reform can transform a society enormously and still not complete the job. Measuring it against total success is the wrong test. Measuring it against what Punjab would look like without it is the right one.

The Escape Hatch That Wasn't

One paragraph, written in 1950, decides whether an Indian remains legally a Dalit. It is still in force, and almost nobody knows it exists.

Everything in the last three chapters has been social history. This chapter is current law, and it is the most directly relevant fact in this entire book to the argument happening in 2026.

■ FACT

Paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.

The Order that defines who is a Scheduled Caste originally restricted that status to **Hindus**.

It was amended to include **Sikhs in 1956**, and **Buddhists in 1990**.

It has never been amended to include **Muslims or Christians**.

Follow what that means for an actual person.

THE SAME FAMILY, FOUR DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

A Dalit person converts to...	SC status	Consequence
Buddhism	Kept	Reservation, atrocities-act protection, scholarships all continue
Sikhism	Kept	Same
Islam	Lost	All of it ends on conversion
Christianity	Lost	All of it ends on conversion

The logic, and the problem with it

The official reasoning is that Islam and Christianity do not recognise caste, so a convert to them cannot suffer caste disability.

Chapters 4 and 5 of this book are, in effect, a forty-page reply to that sentence.

■ INTERPRETATION

The reasoning is internally inconsistent, and the inconsistency is visible on the face of the Order.

Sikhism also formally rejects caste — more explicitly and more institutionally than either Islam or Christianity, as Chapter 6 showed. So does Buddhism; it was the original rejection.

Yet Sikh and Buddhist Dalits keep their status, and Muslim and Christian Dalits do not.

If the test is "does the religion reject caste in theory," all four should be excluded. If the test is "do converts still face caste discrimination in practice," all four should be included. There is no version of the stated principle that produces the actual line.

Which suggests the line was not drawn on that principle. Sikhs were added in 1956 and Buddhists in 1990, in both cases after sustained political mobilisation. The most plausible reading is that the boundary follows political weight rather than logic.

Where it stands now

■ FACT

The question is live in 2026.

Under pressure from the Supreme Court for contemporary evidence, the Union Government constituted a Commission of Inquiry in **October 2022**, headed by former Chief Justice of India **K. G. Balakrishnan**, to study the social and economic status of Dalits who converted to religions other than Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism.

The Commission has received repeated extensions; its tenure was extended to **June 2026**. The Centre has previously opposed extending SC status to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

The Ranganath Misra Commission had recommended in 2007 that the religious restriction be removed. The recommendation was not implemented.

■ INTERPRETATION

Why this matters enormously for the 2026 argument — and why it cuts both ways.

For the Reservation Hatao Andolan: this is, unexpectedly, their strongest single factual point, and they have made it. One of their creators argued that replacing caste quotas with economic criteria would benefit underprivileged Muslims who are excluded from Scheduled Caste classification under current law. That is *correct*. A religion-blind economic test would reach millions of people the present system deliberately does not.

For their critics: the same fact is an argument for fixing the Order, not for abolishing the category. If the problem is that some Dalits are excluded from a remedy, the obvious response is to include them. Removing the remedy from everyone in order to solve the exclusion of some is a strange kind of repair.

And the fact that makes this so awkward: the exclusion has stood for seventy-six years, under governments of every political colour, and has never been a national issue for either side. It became useful to the abolition side in July 2026 and had not previously been anybody's campaign.

India's Own Abolitionists

Centuries before any European arrived, Indians in Indian languages were attacking caste in verse that ordinary people memorised and sang.

Part 3 established that anti-caste argument in India is at least twenty-five centuries old. But the Buddha argued in monasteries, in Pali, to those who came to hear him.

What happened between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries was different in kind. It was mass, popular, vernacular and sung — and it reached people who would never see a manuscript.

Basava, twelfth-century Karnataka

A minister at the Kalyana court who founded a movement rejecting temple ritual, priestly mediation and caste. His followers, the Lingayats, wore the linga on their bodies — the argument being that if the divine is on your person, no priest and no temple stands between you and it.

His *vachanas* — short spoken-word poems in Kannada — are among the most direct attacks on ritual hierarchy in any language. One of the most famous contrasts the rich man's temple with the poor man's body: legs as pillars, the body itself as the shrine, the head as the golden dome. It ends by observing that what stands still shall fall, and what moves shall not.

The movement's confrontation with orthodoxy came to a head over an inter-caste marriage at Kalyana in the twelfth century, and the violence that followed. Eight hundred and fifty years later, inter-caste marriage remains the flashpoint. Nothing in this series repeats itself more exactly.

Ravidas, fifteenth century

A leather-worker from Banaras — from a community treated as untouchable — whose hymns are in the Guru Granth Sahib and who is revered by millions today.

His most remarkable composition describes an imagined city called **Begumpura** — "the place without sorrow." In it there is no suffering, no anxiety, no tax and no property; nobody is second or third; all are equal. People walk where they wish without restriction.

A fifteenth-century Indian leather-worker wrote a description of a society with no caste, no tax and no hierarchy — three hundred years before anyone in Europe wrote a modern utopia.

Kabir, fifteenth century

Raised in a Muslim weaver family in Banaras, claimed by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike, and comfortable insulting all of them. His couplets are still quoted in ordinary conversation across north India.

His line on caste is famous enough to be a proverb: *do not ask the holy man his caste — ask his wisdom*. Elsewhere he asks, of a society obsessed with pollution, how anyone can claim high birth when every person arrives into the world by the same route.

Chokhamela, fourteenth century

A Mahar poet-saint of Maharashtra, from an untouchable community, devoted to Vithoba of Pandharpur — and barred from entering the temple.

■ FACT

His memorial stands at the foot of the temple steps.

Chokhamela's samadhi is at the entrance to the Vithoba temple at Pandharpur, outside the building he was not permitted to enter in life.

There is no more compact illustration of the whole system in India: a man venerated as a saint by the tradition that would not let him through the door, memorialised on the threshold — close enough to honour, far enough to exclude.

And the others

- ▶ **Guru Nanak** (15th–16th c.) — Chapter 6. Whose response to the entire framework was reported as: there is no Hindu, no Musalman.
- ▶ **Namdev** (13th–14th c.) — a tailor; his verses are in the Guru Granth Sahib.
- ▶ **Tukaram** (17th c.) — a Kunbi cultivator, the towering figure of Marathi devotional poetry, mocked by Brahmin contemporaries for writing scripture in a language ordinary people could read.
- ▶ **Mirabai** (16th c.) — a Rajput princess who abandoned her rank, and whose guru is traditionally said to have been Ravidas, the leather-worker.
- ▶ **The Tamil saints** — Nandanar, from an untouchable community, and Tiruppan Alvar, of the Panar community, both remembered in traditions about entering temples closed to them.
- ▶ **The Sufi orders** — dargahs that received visitors of every caste and religion, and still do. Though Sufi lineages had their own status gradations, and claims of Sayyid descent carried weight there too.

■ INTERPRETATION

What the Bhakti movement proves — and what it does not.

It proves that opposition to caste is not a colonial import, not a modern political invention, and not a foreign idea. It is Indian, popular, ancient and continuous, and it was carried out largely by people from the communities that caste crushed.

It also proves something less comfortable. These movements were enormous. They produced scripture. They created new communities. And caste survived all of them.

Several were digested exactly as Part 3 described: the Lingayats became, in effect, a caste; several Bhakti communities became endogamous groups with a place in the local order. The system's usual response to a challenger was not to defeat it but to give it a rung.

Which brings us back to the same conclusion for the fourth time in this book. Caste was never primarily a set of beliefs. Attacking the beliefs — brilliantly, popularly, for eight hundred years — did not remove it.

The Verdicts

Both claims from Chapter 1, judged against everything above.

VERDICT ON CLAIM A

"Outsiders brought caste to India." — Fails.

The evidence against it: Megasthenes around 300 BCE, Fa-Hien around 400 CE, Xuanzang around 630 CE and Al-Biruni around 1030 CE all describe hereditary ranked groups, restricted marriage, inherited occupation and people required to live outside settlements. All four predate the Delhi Sultanate. Al-Biruni was himself a Muslim, writing before Muslim rule.

And the genetic evidence from Part 2 dates the closing of endogamy to roughly two thousand years ago at the latest.

What survives: the weaker claim that outsiders *hardened* or *formalised* an existing system. For the British this is substantially true and well documented, and it is Part 5. For the Sultanate and the Mughals the evidence is thin — they largely governed through the structure and left it in place.

VERDICT ON CLAIM B

"Caste is a Hindu institution." — Partly true, and seriously incomplete.

What is true: the varna framework, the Dharmashastra rules, and the doctrinal justification through karma and rebirth are Hindu in origin. The system's intellectual architecture came from inside the tradition, and no other society produced this specific structure.

What is false: that it is *confined* to Hinduism in India, or that leaving Hinduism escapes it. Caste operates inside Indian Islam, Indian Christianity and Sikhism — all three of which formally reject birth rank, and one of which was purpose-built in India to destroy it.

The correct formulation: caste originated within one tradition and became a property of Indian society as a whole. Religions that enter India do not dissolve it. They acquire it.

■ INTERPRETATION

Why both sides lose here, and what it means for 2026.

The "outsiders did it" argument is used to protect a tradition from accounting for something. It does not work; the dates defeat it.

The "it is their religion's fault" argument is used to locate the problem safely inside a group the speaker does not belong to. It does not work either; the problem is inside every group in the country.

And for the argument on everyone's phones right now, this has a direct consequence. If caste were a Hindu doctrine, then secularising the state — removing caste from forms, from certificates, from public recognition — would drain it. That is precisely the Reservation Hatao Andolan's proposal.

But Sikhism removed the doctrine, the surnames, the separate eating and the priestly mediation, in Punjab, in Punjabi, at scale, three hundred years ago. The structure survived.

Deleting a column on a government form is a far smaller intervention than that, and it is being offered as a bigger one.

Nine Questions Nobody Asks

The blind spots in this stage of the argument.

1. If conversion does not work, what is left?

For two centuries the standard advice to Indians at the bottom was: leave. Change your religion and you change your fate.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 suggest it largely did not work, at least not for the social position. That is a serious problem, because conversion was the main exit anyone had ever identified. If the exit does not lead out, the argument about what does becomes much harder — and much more important.

2. Why does nobody campaign about the 1950 Order?

Millions of Indians are excluded from a legal category on the basis of their religion, by a rule that is internally inconsistent on its own stated logic, and it has stood for seventy-six years.

It has never been a mass movement. Not from the parties that claim to represent Dalits, not from the parties that claim to represent Muslims, not from the reservation-abolition side until it became useful in 2026. Ask why, and the answer will tell you a lot about how Indian politics actually allocates attention.

3. Does including Dalit Muslims and Christians help or hurt existing SC communities?

The question nobody wants to say out loud. Adding tens of millions of people to a category without expanding the quota means the same seats divided among more claimants.

This is a real material conflict of interest between groups who are all, on any honest account, victims of the same structure. It is one reason the campaign has never been enthusiastic, and pretending otherwise helps nobody.

4. Why did the reformers keep becoming castes?

The Lingayats, several Bhakti communities, and communities formed by conversion in every religion — the pattern from Part 3 repeats without exception.

A group that rejects the hierarchy still has to live somewhere, marry someone, and be dealt with by its neighbours. And the only slot Indian society offered a coherent group was a rung on the ladder. Refusing the ideology did not exempt you from the structure.

5. Is "they have caste too" a moral argument or an excuse?

Both, depending on who is holding it, and the distinction matters.

As a factual correction to "caste is purely a Hindu evil," it is valid and necessary. As a response to "caste discrimination is happening," it is a change of subject. That another group also does something wrong has never been an answer to whether it is wrong.

6. Why does the Sikh case get so little attention?

Because it is inconvenient for absolutely everyone. It denies Hindu traditionalists the "other religions solved it" comparison, denies the anti-caste movement the conversion strategy, and denies Sikh institutions a clean record on their own founding principle.

A fact that embarrasses every party to a dispute tends to go unmentioned by all of them. Those are usually the most informative facts available.

7. What would count as evidence that a religion had actually broken caste?

Not sermons. Not scripture. Not even institutions like langar, remarkable as it is.

The only real test is marriage rates. If a community's members marry across former caste lines at a substantially higher rate than the surrounding population, the lock has genuinely loosened there. Everything else can coexist with an intact structure — and, as this book has shown, generally has.

8. Were the Sultans and Mughals uninterested in reform, or unable to attempt it?

Probably both, and the reason matters. A pre-modern state has no capacity to reach inside a hundred thousand villages and change whom people marry. It lacks the officials, the records, the roads and the reason.

Which raises a question for the present: modern states have all of those things. India has had them for seventy-six years, and inter-caste marriage rates have barely moved. That is a much more interesting failure than a medieval one.

9. If foreigners did not bring it, why is that story so popular?

Because it does something valuable for the person telling it. It preserves the tradition, locates the fault outside, and requires nothing of anyone alive now.

And the opposite story does the same work in the other direction — it locates the fault entirely in a religion the speaker has already rejected, and equally requires nothing of them.

Both narratives are, structurally, ways of not being responsible. That is the most useful thing to notice about them.

What The Evidence Can And Cannot Settle

The honest scorecard for Part 4.

WHERE THINGS STAND AFTER THIS PART

Question	Status	Best current answer
Did outsiders bring caste to India?	No	Documented by foreign observers long before 1206
Did Muslim rule harden caste?	Not shown	They governed through it; little evidence of change
Did the British harden it?	Substantially	Well documented — but that is Part 5
Does caste exist among Indian Muslims?	Yes	Documented by the Sachar Committee, 2006
Does caste exist among Indian Christians?	Yes	Separate seating, cemeteries, endogamy
Does caste exist among Sikhs?	Yes	Despite the strongest institutional attack on it
Does conversion end caste disability?	Largely no	Belief changes; the structure does not
Do Dalit Muslims and Christians get SC status?	No	1950 Order; Sikhs added 1956, Buddhists 1990
Is anti-caste thought foreign?	No	Basava, Ravidas, Kabir, Nanak, Chokhamela
How severe was any of it in practice?	Answerable	From documents — Part 6

The three things nobody can tell you

- ▶ **How much conversion was voluntary.** Debated fiercely, politically loaded, and genuinely hard to establish. Force, incentive, persuasion and social pressure all occurred, in proportions nobody can reliably quantify at this distance.

- ▶ **Whether caste among Indian Muslims and Christians is as severe as among Hindus.** That it exists is documented. Whether it operates with the same intensity is a comparative question, and the data to answer it properly has not been collected — partly because the 1950 Order means the state has no reason to collect it.
- ▶ **What the Bhakti movements would have achieved with state power.** Sikhism is the closest thing to a test, and the result is mixed. Counterfactuals are not evidence.

■ INTERPRETATION

The one sentence that carries the whole part.

Four religions have been tried against caste in India. Two arrived from outside; one was born here specifically to break it; one — Buddhism — began as its first and most famous rejection.

All four failed to remove it, and in all four it can be found today.

That is not an argument for despair, and it is not an argument that nothing works. It is an argument about *where to aim*. Every one of those attempts went after belief. The lock was never belief.

The Five-Line Nichod

Everything in this book, compressed. If you remember nothing else, remember these.

PART 4 — 1,000 YEARS OF OUTSIDERS

1. **The invaders did not bring caste, and the proof is foreign.** Megasthenes (c. 300 BCE), Fa-Hien (c. 400 CE), Xuanzang (c. 630 CE) and the Muslim scholar Al-Biruni (c. 1030 CE) all describe hereditary rank, restricted marriage and people forced to live outside villages — every one of them before the Delhi Sultanate of 1206.
2. **Six centuries of Muslim rule left the structure standing.** They governed through zamindars and caste councils because empires need revenue, not reform. Conversion happened mostly by whole communities, so the jati walked through the door intact — which is why caste is inside Indian Islam today.
3. **Caste survived conversion into three religions that reject it.** Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arzal among Muslims, documented by the Government's own Sachar Committee. Separate pews and cemeteries among Christians. Mazhabi and Ravidasia Sikhs, despite langar, the common surname, and a scripture containing the hymns of a leather-worker.
4. **One paragraph from 1950 decides who stays a Dalit.** Convert to Buddhism or Sikhism and you keep Scheduled Caste status. Convert to Islam or Christianity and you lose it. The Balakrishnan Commission has been examining this since October 2022, extended to June 2026.
5. **India produced its own abolitionists, and caste digested them too.** Basava, Ravidas, Kabir, Nanak, Chokhamela, Tukaram — eight centuries of mass, vernacular, sung opposition, much of it by people from the crushed communities. Every one of those movements attacked belief. Caste was never held in place by belief.

Coming next

PART 5 — THE BRITISH MACHINE

Did the English write caste into a spreadsheet?

The census of 1871 and what happened when an empire started counting and ranking castes. The "colonial construction" thesis at full strength, and the rebuttal at full strength. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which declared entire communities born criminal. And the fact that surprises everyone: **the first reservations in world history were Indian, not British** — Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, 1902. Then the Madras Communal Order of 1921, the Round Table Conferences, the Communal Award, and the Poona Pact of 1932 — the deal between Ambedkar and Gandhi from which everything modern flows.

A closing thought: if you came to this part expecting it to settle a score, I hope it did the opposite. The most useful thing I found here is that the two most popular stories about the origins of caste are both ways of arranging for it to be someone else's problem. — L.S.

Sources & Notes

Every factual claim in Part 4, and where it comes from.

Foreign observers

Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind* (c. 1030 CE) — the four varnas and their derivation from the Purusha Sukta account; the Antyaja, eight groups outside the fourfold order, segregated by occupation and living on the outskirts of towns and villages; Chandala, Doma, Hadi and others required to live outside villages and to clean their filth. · Megasthenes, *Indika* (c. 300 BCE, surviving in later quotation) — hereditary groups who may not marry outside or change occupation. · Fa-Hien (c. 400 CE) — Chandalas living apart and required to announce their approach. · Xuanzang (c. 630 CE) — the hereditary orders, absence of intermarriage, and butchers, scavengers and executioners dwelling outside city walls. Dates for the Delhi Sultanate: founded 1206.

The Sultanate and Mughal period

Standard accounts of revenue administration through zamindars and existing local intermediaries. · Ziauddin Barani, *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* (14th century) — the argument that high office and education should be restricted to the well-born. · On collective rather than individual conversion, and the consequent persistence of jati identity across religious change, this is the mainstream position in the historiography of Indian conversion.

Caste among Indian Muslims

Sachar Committee Report (2006) — the Ashraf/Ajlaf/Arzal division; the finding that hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupation are present among Indian Muslims; OBC and SC/ST Muslims estimated at around 40% of the Muslim population on 2004–05 data. · Pasmanda movement — scholarship dates organised Pasmanda activism to the late 1990s; Pasmanda activists and scholars estimate the backward share of Indian Muslims at 80–85%.

Caste among Indian Christians and Sikhs

Documented and litigated practices including separate seating, separate cemeteries or walled sections, separate hearses and separate processions; the historically high social position and endogamy of Kerala's Syrian Christian communities; the long-standing grievance of Dalit Christian organisations regarding church leadership. · On Sikhism: langar, the common surnames Singh and Kaur, Khalsa initiation, and the inclusion in the Guru Granth Sahib of compositions by Ravidas, Kabir, Namdev, Sadhna and Sain. Persisting groupings include Jat, Khatri, Arora, Ramgarhia, Mazhabi and Ravidasia; disputes over gurdwara access and cremation grounds are documented in litigation.

The 1950 Order and the current position

The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, paragraph 3 — status originally restricted to Hindus; amended to include Sikhs in 1956 and Buddhists in 1990; Muslims and Christians never included. · Ranganath Misra Commission (2007) recommended removing the religious restriction; not implemented. · Commission of Inquiry headed by former Chief Justice K. G. Balakrishnan constituted in October 2022 to examine SC status for Dalit converts to other religions; tenure extended several times, most recently to June 2026. The Centre has previously opposed extension of SC status to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. · The Reservation Hatao Andolan's argument that economic criteria would benefit underprivileged Muslims excluded from SC classification is reported in *The Quint*, 29 July 2026.

The Bhakti tradition

Basava and the Lingayat movement, twelfth-century Karnataka; the vachana contrasting the rich man's temple with the poet's own body; the Kalyana crisis over an inter-caste marriage. · Ravidas — the *Begumpura* composition describing a city without sorrow, tax, property or rank; hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib. · Kabir — the couplet on not asking a holy man his caste. · Chokhamela — Mahar poet-saint of Pandharpur; his samadhi stands at the steps of the Vithoba

temple he could not enter. · Namdev, Tukaram, Mirabai, Nandanar, Tiruppan Alvar, Guru Nanak. · On Sufi dargahs receiving visitors across caste and religion, and on status gradations within Sufi lineages.

A note on what is missing — and on corrections

Part 4 makes no claim about colonial administration, which is Part 5, or about how severely caste rules were applied to real people in periods we can document, which is Part 6. Anything marked **CONTESTED CLAIM** stays contested until evidence is produced — including claims made by people I might agree with.

Verse renderings in Chapter 8 are given in summary rather than as literal translations where the original is in Kannada, Marathi or medieval Hindi and multiple published translations differ; the substance is not in dispute. If you find an error, I want to know. Corrections will be carried in later parts.

END OF PART FOUR

THE RESERVATION FILES

1,000 Years of Outsiders

Researched and written by **Lovepreet Singh**

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*Part 5 – The British Machine: did the English write caste
into a spreadsheet?
follows.*