Preface

SOME years ago while trying to write an essay on South India, I found myself drawn almost inevitably into a discussion of caste, which is admittedly at its strongest there. And the more I thought about it the more convinced I became that the accepted theories were unsatisfactory. If it be true, as it is, that ancient ideas of the origin of caste are fantastic, it is equally true that modern theories are also open to so many objections that none of them will bear critical examination. The idea that the beginnings of caste are to be found in aboriginal customs is not new, but so far as I am aware it has not been discussed hitherto in any detail. It has merely been suggested as a possible hypothesis without any attempt to co-ordinate it with other ideas. Dr. Schweitzer in a recent book on Indian Thought and its Development brushes aside the theory that the ideas of “world and life negation and magico-religious ideas were originally foreign to Aryan thought” and were borrowed from the aborigines, on the ground that “we know nothing of the thought of the aboriginal inhabitants.” This, it is true, is not the same thing as a denial of the origin of caste to the pre-Aryans. Although the idea of “world and life negation” may be connected with magico-religious notions, it does not follow that they had not separate origins, and caste in its origin has little to do with the former but is closely concerned with the latter. If we know nothing of the thought of the “aborigines” we do know something of their customs and of the customs of other races in the same grade of civilization. We are entitled to make reasoned inferences from these.

This inquiry led me to the question of untouchability and to that of the peculiar veneration for the ox and the cow. These customs, which are special to India, are too often taken for granted, however inconvenient they may be and however distasteful to European ideas, but it is evident that they must have had a beginning. Neither is a custom which would spring up naturally in the course of the evolution
of history. The chapter on Maratha customs is the outcome of certain researches in the Maratha country and is largely founded on information given to me by Maratha Brahmans. I do not know whether or how far these same customs are to be found in other parts of India.

My thanks are due to Dr. Ramjee Shanani, who has read the manuscript and has made some valuable suggestions.