

A Note on Caste

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No aspect of Indian society is as poorly understood as its social organization. Gloria Goodwin Raheja rightly points out:¹ “The ritual centrality of the village cultivator, or of the king in Indic textual discourse, has been virtually ignored in anthropological and Indological debate concerning caste and kingship, in favor of a view that founds caste and ritual solely upon considerations of hierarchy or rank.” Her own research in Pahansu in Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh revealed the significance of *dāna* in the relationship between the dominant community of Gujars and the other communities. Her work supported the theory of Hocart² that at the village level the cultivator is analogous to the king and that there exists an ordering of the castes where “priest, washerman and drummer are all treated alike, for they are all priests.” But on one point Hocart and Raheja are off the mark, and this is in seeing the relations as being part of a ritual where the inauspiciousness associated with *dāna* is fundamental in structuring the social order. It seems to me that viewing the relations in terms of ritual is just a gloss to explain a complex tradition, although this gloss has been used in Indian texts also. If ritual described in Vedic texts was the main idea behind the connections, as Heesterman³ and Raheja argue, then similar customs within Muslim communities of India would be unexplainable. And how would one then explain a similar tradition of giving and receiving within a Hindu community with no caste distinctions, namely the Kashmiris?

The caste system, as described in Indian textbooks, is a creation of the anthropologists and sociologists of the nineteenth century who were then studying the bewildering complexity of Indian society. The informants of these social scientists used the theories of the archaic *dharmaśāstras* to fit the communities in a four-*varṇa* model. Although such classification was wrong, it has been used by generations of Indologists and filtering into popular books it has, by endless repetition, received a certain validity and authority. In an example of reality being fashioned in the image of a simulacrum, many Indians have started believing in the enduring truth of this classification!

An analysis of Vedic texts does not support a hierarchical model of caste.⁴ In this note I shall take the specific example of Kashmiri Hindus.

It is generally accepted that all the Kashmiri Hindus belong to the same

community or jāti. Is that because they belong to a single caste or varṇa resulting from the conversion of the other castes to Islam? Does this represent a variant of Hindu religion where the caste system does not exist? There is considerable evidence that the theory that all but the brahmins were converted to Islam in Kashmir is wrong. The Kashmiri Hindus preserve appellations, such as rājānaka, that represent non-priestly functions.

Let me first deal with the designation Paṇḍit that is applied to Kashmiri Hindus. According to Henny Sender,⁵ this designation was requested by Jai Ram Bhan, a Kashmiri courtier in the Mughal court, in Delhi, of the Emperor Muhammad Shah (1719-1749), and it was granted. Apparently, before this period both Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims were addressed as *khuājāh* in the Mughal court.

Kashmiri Hindus call themselves *baṭṭa*, from the Sanskrit *bhartri*, meaning master. Such an appellation may be a reflection of the community's self-image that emphasizes success and excellence and it need not have any sociological implications. T.N. Madan quotes⁶ the idea of the identity with Śiva—*Śivoham*—as being basic to the Kashmiri's notion of *bhattil*, his self-identity. Śiva, the principle of consciousness, is universally present in all humans.

Two subgroups of Kashmiri Hindus, that were sometimes considered to be separate, are *buher*, and *purib*: *buher* (from the Kashmiri word for grocer) and *purib* (for easterner). It appears most likely that these subgroupings, that have all but disappeared now, reflected the profession of business in the case of one, and ancestry that could be traced to an immigrant from east India in the case of the other.

Kashmiri Hindus have other names that indicate ancestry outside India; for example, the names Turki, Kashgari, or Ladakhi. It is sometimes suggested that these are nicknames indicating family sojourn in these regions and this might indeed have been the reason in some cases. But that is not so always is established by the Turkish physiological type amongst the Kashmiri Hindus. Evidently, the community of Hindus has been fluid and it has admitted those who wished to belong to it. It is an accident of circumstances that all these Hindus, of diverse origins, have seen themselves to belong to the brahmin category.

The dominant philosophical and religious system current in Kashmir is that of Śaivism. According to the texts of the Śaivites all those who accept the kula (Śaivite) dharma become kauls, obliterating their previous jāti. According to its doctrine of recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) one should recognize as one's true identity a single, autonomous consciousness. The Śaivite initiation has always been open to everyone—and that includes women. There are accounts of how Abhinavagupta, the great Śaivite philosopher who lived about a thousand years ago, had several women disciples. Later, Kashmir had great women sages such as Lalleśvarī and Rūpa Bhavānī.

The fact that Kashmiri Hinduism is universal does not mean that social inequity did not exist in Kashmir. Such inequity reflected the social and political ideas of its times and it did not spring from any fundamental religious

considerations.

So is Kashmiri Hinduism different from Hinduism elsewhere? The answer is no! There is evidence that there was no caste system based on birth in the Vedic times. The Purāṇas say that during the golden age (Satya Yuga) everyone was a brahmin. That these categories mean mental states is illustrated by Brahma Purāṇa (Chapter 7) where two people are described who were first vaiśya and then became brahmin. The puruṣasūkta hymn of the Rigveda (10.90) speaks of the brahmin, rājanya (kṣatriya), vaiśya, and śūdra as having sprung from the head, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of puruṣa, the primal man. This mention of varṇas has been taken to indicate that a caste system existed in the Vedic times. But it is repeatedly mentioned elsewhere that each human is in the image of the puruṣa which would indicate that each human internalizes aspects of all the varṇas. The Vedic gods are themselves classed as belonging to different varṇas in different situations. So the label of a specific varṇa applied to a person may have implied a certain personality type. Later texts speak of how everyone is a śūdra when born, implying that the yajñopavīta (mekhala) ceremony was open to everyone. A girdle was also tied in a ceremony to girls.

Texts proclaim that one's nature alone, and not birth, determines to which varṇa one belongs. In the famous dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and Yaka in the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira is asked whether a person is a brahmin based on "birth, learning, or conduct" and his answer is that only "conduct" makes a person a brahmin and not birth. It is no wonder then that brahmin is not a racial category emerging from a mythic fair race; some of the darkest Indians are brahmins.

In the ancient Aryan society the varṇas were functional groupings and not closed endogamous birth-descent groups. It has been suggested that the jāti system in its modern form developed very late perhaps not before 1000 A.D. The Chinese scholar Hsuan Tsang in the seventh century was not aware of it. As a response to historical events one might then credit the emergence of the modern jāti system to the next fundamental change in the Indian polity that occurred with the invasions of the Turks.

There is no synonym for caste in any Indian language. The Indian words that caste supposedly translates are jātis, which means a large kin-community or descent-group, and varṇa, which implies a classification based on function. The dynamics between the jātis has been influenced a great deal by historical and political factors. During the periods of economic growth, the jātis have been relatively open-ended; during periods of hardships the jātis have tended to draw in for the sake of survival. The word 'caste' comes from the Portuguese *casta*, a word that was meant to describe the jāti system, but slowly it has come to have a much broader connotation.

Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to India about 2,300 years ago, noted the existence of seven classes, namely that of philosophers, peasants, herdsmen, craftsmen and traders, soldiers, government officials and councillors. These classes were apparently jātis. Van Buitenen⁷ has argued that these classes were

treasury or tax categories. Nowhere does Megasthenes speak of four varṇas.

In its long history India has had diverse social and religious currents. It is only in the exception that the reality has conformed to the theory of the conservative dharmaśāstras. The dharmaśāstras have a considerable amount of contradictory ideas so it will be useful to find, using appropriate criterion of consistency, their 'original' forms before interpolations that have become part of the standard versions. In other words, one will have to go to a layer of texts prior to that of popular commentators.⁸

The Vaiṣṇavas emphatically define varṇa based on one's actions. This is repeated by the Bhagavadgītā and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Brahma Purāṇa (Chapter 223) says, "People are classed differently according to their nature. Conduct is the cause for brahminhood, not birth, sacramental rites, revelation, lineage. When established in a brahmin's conduct, even a śūdra becomes a brahmin." The Śaivites, likewise, do not subscribe to a caste system. Those who follow the conservative law books have always been a miniscule minority of the population.

Although jātis may pay lip service to the priest as an intermediary to the gods when it comes to ritual, each community considers itself to be the highest. The priest need not be a brahmin. Most jātis do not know where they belong in the theory of four varṇa classification since such categorization is meaningless. Although current self-identities of the communities are generally a snapshot freezing the equations and attitudes of the late nineteenth century, when caste classification was sought by the British, changing economic and political equations are having an effect on class equations.

But in the equations between the communities hierarchy is not clear. If the brahmins were to be accepted as the highest community then other communities would have no hesitation in giving their daughters to the brahmins. But in reality they do not. The Rajputs consider the brahmins to be other-wordly or plain beggars; the traders consider the brahmins to be impractical; and so on. In classical Sanskrit plays the fool is always a brahmin. In other words, each different community has internalized a different outlook on life but these outlooks cannot be placed in any hierarchical ordering. The internalized images of the other must, by its very nature, be a gross simplification and it will never conform exactly to reality.

The French sociologist Louis Dumont claims that the castes are separate but interdependent hereditary groups of occupational specialists. He postulates that the principle of purity-impurity keeps the segments separate from one another. In this system each jāti closes its boundaries to lower jātis, refusing them the privileges of intermarriage and other contacts defined to be polluting. Facts belie the Dumont theory: Indian Muslims and Christians also have castes. The eighteenth century German society was divided into princes, nobles, burghers, peasants and serfs between whom no marriage other than morganatic was possible. Korea and Japan also had the practice of untouchability. The Buddhist dogma about non-killing appears to have led to the ostracization of those people

whose trades involved hunting, slaughtering animals and so on.

One might wonder why the communities in India turned inwards. It has been argued that European and Western traditions, owing to their exclusivist nature, set out to obtain uniform belief and practices. The inclusivist nature of the Indian religions, on the other hand, places each group in a larger system.

M.N. Srinivas has pointed out that a process of Sanskritization is responsible for movement within the jāti system. Sanskritization implies emulating a dominant caste of any high varṇa. One should add that there also exists the dynamic of fragmentation. As proclaimed by the Manu Smṛti 10.42: "In age after age the communities are pulled up or pulled down in birth among men here on earth." Furthermore, there are also transformations within a lifetime.

The social structure of India reflects no single ideology which is why no single theory has proved to be rich enough to describe the system. The system represents several symbiotic ideologies. These ideologies are balanced by political and economic forces. The ideologies of the brahmin, the warrior, the trader, and the commoner were all proclaimed to be equivalent in their effectiveness in obtaining knowledge: this was reflected in the paths of jñāna yoga, karma yoga, rāja yoga, and bhakti yoga. Even festivals like Sarasvatī pūjā, Dassera, Divali, and Holi celebrate the different attitudes.

The Vedas do not sanction the notion of caste as it has been understood in recent times. New technology, science, and political organization is changing the social institutions of India. In many ways the modern Indian castes are no more than the ethnic communities in the West.

To return to the question I posed in the beginning of this note, Hindus do not have a hierarchical caste system although, as in societies elsewhere in the world, there are communities which are more powerful than others. The landholding community is the dominant community in the rural India; in modern urban India the communities are to be viewed primarily as ethnic groups.

Notes

1. G.G. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1988.
2. A.M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study*. Methuen, London, 1950; A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1970.
3. J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1985.
4. S. Kak, "Understanding caste in India," *Mankind Quarterly*, vol 34, pp. 117-123, 1993; S. Kak, *India at Century's End*. VOI, New Delhi, 1994.
5. H. Sender, *The Kashmiri Pandits*. OUP, New Delhi, 1988.
6. T.N. Madan, *Family and Kinship*. OUP, New Delhi, 1965, 1989.

7. J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Studies in Indian Literature and Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1988.
8. For one such effort see Surendra Kumāra, *Viśuddha Manu Smṛti*. Arsh Sahitya Prachar Trust, Delhi, 1990.