

Understanding Caste In India

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When viewed broadly, social relations in society can be seen as mimicking technology. Past few centuries have seen the focus of technology to change from clocks to steam engines to computers. Paralleling this was the change in science from Newtonian mechanics to thermodynamics to the holistic views of quantum mechanics and information theory. The contemporary age is the age of computers and information. Science and technology have seen a shift from the simple to the complex. Societies have changed from the feudal to the democratic and we see new developments that have been called post-modern. This path has led to increasing consolidation, although one sees signs of a coming fragmentation. One would expect that social organization would now be based on symbols and information. The massive movements of people since the Second World War has also ensured that ethnic diversity within states will compel such societies everywhere to confront multiculturalism.

Ancient Indian society had information and symbols as its focus. This happened because the science of the mind was the most prized science in ancient India. Cognitive science is considered a major frontier of modern science. This science is being studied only with respect to the individual but also social groups. Individuals use language to express themselves; social organizations also represent a language that reflects the cognitive categories of the society. Social structure codes societal processes. No living structure can be based on closed categories.

Caste has been often seen through the dichotomous categories of Newtonian mechanics. We wish to show that its proper understanding can emerge only if a holistic paradigm is used for its analysis.

Actors and Agents

Europe's successes in the past few centuries were undoubtedly due to the technology, science, and organization that were stimulated further by the discovery of the New World. The colonial successes of Europe were facilitated by a mastery not merely of technology but of signs. As sailors and traders the Europeans learnt to appreciate the power of signs. On the other hand, the old civilizations were so inwardly focused that there was a refusal to learn the language of the outsider.

Since then other unintended consequences of the mastery of signs have come to light. The interpretation of signs into European languages could not have been a one-way process. The native interlocutors were themselves interpreting the facts in order to conform to the expectations of the interrogators. The analysis that emerged was thus based on many false premises. Nevertheless, in the post-colonial era the native elites, now properly literate only in the European languages, have embraced this analysis. This is a fascinating illustration of how representations can alter reality. This prefigures the change in the self-image in the West by the images fostered by television and the media.

As example consider the Brahmin caste. Books by Indologists routinely translate this into priest. But in reality priests have a relatively low status in India. To give an extreme example, the Mahabrahmin priests, who supervise funeral services, have been "treated much like untouchables." The reality of status is highly paradoxical; the brahmin is respected if he renounces his expected function. The reality runs counter to the claims of generations of Indologists.

Theories of Caste

There is no synonym for caste in any Indian language. The Indian words that caste supposedly translates are *jāti*, which means a large kin-community or descent-group, and *varna*, which implies a classification based on function. The word *varna* is from ancient Sanskrit theory and it has no real relevance to today's society; the word *jāti* properly denotes what may be termed as a group bound by customs and traditions. 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--

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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 which slowly 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 councilors. These classes were apparently jātis.

The jātis were integrated into a cooperative system where each had a role and was cared for. One could consider it as a kind of a decentralized social security system where contracts were negotiated within the *yajamāna* (*jajmani*) framework. The dominant caste provided basic necessities to the other jāti groups in exchange for services. The activities in the village could be viewed as a symbolic ritual where the *yajamāna* was the patron. The *yajamāna* system is thus based on the recognition by the dominant group that it is a part of a larger community and therefore it has an obligation to support the other communities.

Rigveda 10.90 speaks of the Brāhmana, Rājanya (Ksatriya), Vaiśya, and Śudra as having sprung from the head, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of Purusa, the primal man. This mention of varnas 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 Purusa which would indicate that each human internalizes aspects of all the varnas. Many texts proclaim that one's nature alone, and not birth, determines to which varna one belongs. It is generally agreed that in the ancient Aryan society the varnas were functional groupings and not closed endogamous birth-descent groups. Basham (1967, p.148) suggests that the jāti system in its modern form developed very late. The Chinese scholar Hsu an 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 Turkic invasions.

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 Dharmashastras. The Vaishnavas emphatically define varna based on one's actions. Bhāgavata Purāna 7.11 proclaims clearly: "One's nature alone determines to which varna one

belongs". The Tantrists claim that all those who accept the Kula (Tantric) dharma become Kauls (Mahānirvāna Tantra 14.180-9).

What is Caste in India?

If one limits oneself to an analysis of the term *jāti*, one would see that its implications have varied with history. Many scholars believe that the system of *jāti* that exist now emerged only about a thousand years ago. If we accept that view then this emergence was perhaps a response to the catastrophic disruption to legal and political institutions caused by the Turkic invasions. With the destruction of the previous political order, different occupational communities created their own systems of justice and governance. In this situation, a local social structure developed which centered about the dominant community.

Although *jātis* may pay lip service to the Brahmin as an intermediary to the gods when it comes to ritual, each caste considers itself to be the highest. If the Brahmins were to be accepted as the highest caste then other castes would have no hesitation in giving their daughters to the Brahmins. But in reality they do not. The Rajputs consider the Brahmins to be otherworldly, 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 Question of Pollution

Dumont (1970) 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 supposedly uniquely Hindu 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 (Zinkin 1962). Korea and Japan also

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had the practice of untouchability.

Part of the mystification of the Indian social system has occurred due to a flawed understanding of the notion of ritual. Hindu ritual is meant to capture the connections between the human and the cosmic and highlight the paradoxes of separation and unity. Ritual is a symbolic representation of basic analytical knowledge where the context of the knowledge is not widely known (Kak 1993). A normative social structure is acknowledged to be arbitrary and meant to be broken. The outsider has tended to assign an importance to ritual in Indian discourse unwarranted by reality. The understanding of pollution, and its relation to ritual, has varied across region and age.

Quigley (1993) notes that the notion of caste is a very complex one. Ideologies of materialism, that considers caste as a rationalization of social inequality, and idealism, in which caste is taken to represent notions of relative purity, are incapable of providing adequate explanations. In recent decades the idealist position, presented by sociologists like Louis Dumont has become the dominant one. According to Quigley:

[The] practitioners of [recent anthropology] cling on to the flotsam of a theory which their own evidence devastatingly undermines. Unable to visualize a general structure of caste which would displace Dumont's theory, they hang on to it unremittingly even though their own evidence shows again and again that this theory simply does not explain what is known about India... The entrenched idea that "Brahmans are the highest caste" has done most to hinder an alternative formulation of how caste systems work. (Quigley 1993)

Quigley bases his own analysis on the relationships between the king and the priest, defined very early in the Vedic times, which has recently been examined by the Dutch scholar J.C. Heesterman. This analysis defines the role of castes in terms of relationships with the dominant economic and political groups. But ultimately such an approach is unsatisfactory because the Vedic texts describe the relationship between the priest and the king in relation to ritual. To use the theory of such relationship for the secular world is not quite correct. Few Brahmins were ever priests; also there have always been

non-Brahmin priests.

Coda

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

Marriott (1976) claims that Indian society is highly transactional: the giver is of superior rank to the receiver and the served is superior to the server. But this leads to contradictions: Is the Brahmin beggar receiving or being served? Kolenda (1978) claims that a caste is an endogamous descent-group. She expects a new system of competitive descent-groups will replace the system that was characterized by localized hierarchy owing to the isolation of the village. But as before there will be several ideologies behind the impulse to form new communities.

Srinivas (1962) pointed out that the process of Sanskritization is responsible for movement within the jāti system. Sanskritization implies emulating a dominant caste of any high varna. One should add that there also exists the dynamic of fragmentation. Ancient Indian political theory speaks of an opposition between settled community (*grāma*) and wilderness (*aranya*) (Heesterman 1985). Even during the Mughal rule there was a similar divide between the revenue paying region called *ra'iyatī* and the rebellious known as *mawās*. There has existed such a divide in terms of the belief system as well. Various movements have sought to overturn the varna system. In recent times, the institution of quotas has prompted many groups to seek classification as "low" caste.

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 aristocrat, 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 Sarasvati puja, Dassera, Divali, and Holi celebrate the different attitudes.

New technology, science, and political organization will change

the social institutions of India. In many ways the modern Indian castes are no different from the ethnic communities in the West. The societal organizations of the West and the East can thus be seen to converge.

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The Origin of the Bharat Dance

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Bharat dance, a classical dance, is popularly known as *Bharat natayam* in India. Tamilnadu (the extreme south of India) claims its origin. The counterclaim is that it may have originated in Kashmir. There is also the belief is that the name may have come from the sage *Bharat*, who wrote the source treatise.

Bharat dance is particularly appreciated for its gestures (*abhinayas*) and foot work meant to convey emotion and passion. It is danced to a calculated rhyth (*thalam*) generally believed to have originated in the second century B.C.

Specialties and Peculiarities

The principles that must be adhered to in *Bharat* dance may be listed as follows:

1. The head is not moved haphazardly;
2. The chest is not twisted;
3. The hip is not distorted;
4. The legs are bent at the knee to either side;
5. The leg is raised to only the knee level;
6. The hand is swiftly pulled towards neck and extended in the same straight line;
7. The head is moved sideways only in a straight line;