

INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Indian village as a unity and extension, village and caste

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Introduction

In India, for centuries, caste system and its sub division has been a very prominent segmentation of the society. The division of people into various varnas, jatis etc was basically on the basis of occupation. The work force was bifurcated into various castes as per their activity and skills. The skill and expertise was passed on from generations to generations whereby the profession ran in the family hierarchy and became the **family occupation**. Each person taught his descendant the intricacies and task proficiency leading to talent and specialization confined within the clan. The know-how was not leaked out and hence, the demand for a particular skill set and production led to their increase in value, worth and requirement. The division and social order was very rigid; there was rarely any upward mobility, thus it was a closed system of social differentiation, grouping and order.

The centuries old system in which the manufacturing activity of a particular kind remained confined to a particular caste, carrying forward the family occupation over generations and retaining the meticulous craft skills and specialization led to the closed system of tradition of **‘the caste’**.

Amongst the earliest form of services, were in **kind**, and the simple exchange of goods was called the *‘Barter System’*. This system of trade involved no sort of any money transactions. The exchange of goods was merely on the basis of necessity, and was equivalent in nature. The exchange was balanced with no greed or profit motive. However, when services were offered in return for the basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing and security, then the system started to become a ‘closed’ structure; wherein the services rendered were in gratitude and passed over generations and there was no way of letting go of it by the same castes. If they resented or repelled, it led to clashes and out casting, thereby maintaining and mounting the rigidity of the caste structure. This closed hierarchical structure with the dominant caste on one hand and the suppressive and dependent group on the other hand, came to be known as the various Jatis, Varnas and Caste group. The artisans had an economic rationale connecting them to the dominant higher castes. In return to their services, they got security and protection in times of crises and at times free-land to build their home. The 18th and 19th century saw famines, drought and floods, which were rampant and inevitable. Therefore, security became necessary leading to dependency and the closed caste hierarchy. Crises could not be averted without support from the dominant castes, the scarcity of food and water, lack of agricultural produce required emergency relief to restore livelihood and fulfill basic needs. These needs got fulfilled by support from the dominant castes, however, in exchange; they had to commit their loyalty and service over generations. Hence, it became a vicious whirlpool with no way of

reverting back or coming out of it. There was no way to forego this *Jajmani System of artisans* - Patrons power relation. Hence, the so called tradition and relationships which started as service rendered to the Patrons or Jajmans, which was called the *Jajmani system*, got transformed over decades, into a rigid caste structure.

The Jajmani System

For centuries, the production and manufacturing activity in rural parts of India was done exclusively by hereditary artisan caste bound to the leading agricultural castes by traditional ties. Known as the **Jajmani System**, this reciprocal classification existed throughout the sub continent, though it was more clearly articulated in some areas than others. A vital economic rationale for the prevalence of the Jajmani system seems to have been the refuge it provided during times of scarcity, especially the recurrent famine. The jajmani was fairly flexible, in that it combined features of subsistence and commodity production. Jajmani system is an Indian institution of great antiquity.

H. Wiser in his study of Karimpur village of United Provinces of India during 1930s found that Jajmani System is an example of solidarity in inter-caste relationships, but at the same time it does not represent symmetrical interrelationship for the members of different castes involved in the system. He found that the system has economic weakness. Due to the failure of the percolation theory of social development, poor people are highly dependent on non-institutional sources of credit. Economic weaknesses of the *Jajmani System* also gave way to increased non-institutional sources of credit. It all happened despite the high opportunities of employment generation that lie in agriculture sector and RNFS (rural non-farm sector).

The Varna Model

The pattern of social classes in Hinduism is called the "caste system." Basic caste is called varna, or "color." Subcaste, or jati, "birth, life, rank," is a traditional subdivision of varna.

The varna system is a social order of the people based on their type of work and livelihood activity. The four basic Varnas or castes as they are also called, are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, among which the Brahmins hold the highest position, respect and authority whereas the Shudras are placed at the lowest rung and are looked down upon. This social grouping as per their superiority - inferiority are: *Brahmins*-the priests also known as the twice-born; the *Kshatriyas* - warriors by profession; *Vaishyas*-the traders and lastly *Shudras* the laborers. These Varnas not only dictates one's occupation, but goes beyond to include other means such as dietary habits and interaction with members of other varnas as well. Members belonging to a high varna enjoy wealth and opportunities whereas those to a lower rank perform menial tasks.

The works of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are different, in harmony with the three powers of their born nature. The works of a Brahmin are peace; self-harmony, austerity, and purity; loving-forgiveness and righteousness; vision and wisdom and faith. Kshatriyas have: a heroic mind, inner fire, constancy, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and

noble leadership whereas Trade, agriculture and the rearing of cattle is the work of a Vaishya. And the work of the Shudra is service.

Historical Background

According to the Rig Veda, sacred texts that date back to oral traditions of more than 3,000 years ago, progenitors of the four ranked varna groups sprang from various parts of the body of the primordial man, which Brahma created from clay. Each group had a function in sustaining the life of society--the social body. Brahmins, or priests, were created from the mouth. They were to provide for the intellectual and spiritual needs of the community. Kshatriyas, warriors and rulers, were derived from the arms. Their role was to rule and to protect others. Vaishyas--landowners and merchants--sprang from the thighs, and were entrusted with the care of commerce and agriculture. Shudras--artisans and servants--came from the feet. Their task was to perform all manual labor.

The first three varnas are called the twice born. This has nothing to do with reincarnation. Being "twice born" means that you come of age religiously, making you a member of the Vedic religion, eligible to learn Sanskrit, study the Vedas, and perform Vedic rituals. The "second birth" is thus like Confirmation.. According to the Laws of Manu (see footnotes for details), boys are "born again" at specific ages: 8 for Brahmins; 11 for Kshatriyas; and 12 for Vaishyas. A thread is bestowed at the coming of age to be worn around the waist as the symbol of being twice born. The equivalent of coming of age for girls is marriage. The bestowal of the thread is part of the wedding ceremony. That part of the wedding ritual is even preserved in Jainism. The varna division is a rigid closed system of stratification. The rigidity may well be due to the influence of the idea of karma, that poor birth is morally deserved¹.

The Jati System

The terminology Jati used in the Indian sub continent refers to "race", "breed", or "lineage". Jatis are the sub divisions of the four basic varnas, a formal demarcation on the basis of the type of profession or activity. There are around 25,000 Jatis in India, each associated to a specific occupation and lifestyle.

These social systems are traditional, hereditary systems of social stratification. Though historically and geographically widespread, the most well-known division and differentiation system today is the Indian system of social stratification. It is most prominent and strongly defined in the Indian sub-continent, 'Jati' is a sanskrit word meaning a birth based classification; a strict and firm system of classification of people in terms of activities they perform. The subsistence economy of rural India, dependent upon a jati-based division of labour, is the essence of *caste*.

¹ <http://www.friesian.com/caste.htm>

Anthropologists use the term to refer to a social group that is endogamous and occupationally specialized; such groups are common in highly stratified societies with a very low degree of social mobility.

Jati and their Relationship to Land

Jati was divided according to their relationship to land. Landowners occupied the top of the pyramid while the landless were at the bottom. There was a graduation among landowners depending upon the amount of land owned by a household followed by tenants and sharecroppers, both categories being formally obtained in the land reforms following independence. When a jati owned the bulk of land in a village, and enjoyed numerical strength, it exercised dominance in village affairs, everyone obeying its decrees, even castes marked ritually higher. Such jatis were called 'dominant castes'. Another pan-Indian phenomenon was the existence of a large overlap between landlessness and traditional 'untouchable' castes, a fact which enhanced their poverty, misery, and exploitability. Traditionally, every big landowner had, besides his tenants and sharecroppers, a few servants who worked for him and his household as tied laborers. A tied laborer generally spent a few years working for the landowner-master paying off a debt which he, his father, or guardian, had borrowed from the landowner. Such relationships also frequently continued from generation to generation. This is referred to as 'bonded labor' in the literature, and it was legally banned in 1976, but manages to continue here and there surreptitiously (Srinivas 2003). The existence of disjunction between status (ritual rank) and power is the hallmark of caste according to Louis Dumont (1970).

The Untouchables

Outside of the Varna system are the 'Untouchables'. Toilet cleaning and garbage removal were some of the tasks considered untouchable. Those performing these tasks were considered polluted and were not to be touched. Untouchables had separate entrances to homes and also drank from separate wells. They were considered to be in a permanent state of impurity. Untouchables were named "*Harijans*" (Children of God) by the Father of the Nation, M. K. Gandhi. He tried to raise their status with symbolic gestures such as befriending and eating with the so called untouchables. Upward mobility is very rare in the system. Most people remain in one varna their entire life and also marry within their group. Rigidity makes it a 'closed system', unlike the 'class' hierarchy which is comparatively flexible and open.

In India, the term "Untouchable" is now regarded as insulting or politically incorrect (like *Eta* in Japan for the traditional tanners and pariahs). Gandhi's *Harijans* ("children of God") or *Dalits* ("downtrodden") are preferred. When Mahatma Gandhi's sub caste refused him permission to go to England, (Gandhi was a Vaish) he went anyway and was ejected from the caste. After he returned, his family got him back in, but while in England he was technically an outcaste. Existing tribal people as well as Untouchables are also called the "scheduled castes," since the British drew up a "schedule" listing the castes that they regarded as backwards, underprivileged, or oppressed.

The Untouchables, nevertheless, have their own traditional professions and their own subcastes. Those professions (unless they can be evaded in the greater social mobility of modern, urban, anonymous life) involve too much pollution to be performed by caste Hindus:

(1) dealing with the bodies of dead animals (like the sacred cattle that wander Indian villages) or unclaimed dead humans.

(2) tanning leather, from such dead animals, and manufacturing leather goods.

(3) cleaning up the human and animal waste for which in traditional villages there is no sewer system.

M.K.Gandhi fought for the upliftment of the status of the untouchables. He saw the miserable treatment being imposed upon them and referred to them as harijans, meaning men of God.

The Dalits

Subsequent to the Indian independence, the harijans came to be known as the **Dalits**. Dalit are poor, deprived and socially backward. Their most basic needs of food, shelter, and safety are not fulfilled. They also cannot access decent education and employment. The systematic denial of their basic human rights results in a lack of education, food, healthcare, and economic opportunity, thereby keeping Dalit in perpetual bondage

As the 'untouchables' are outside the varna model, they depend upon the higher castes for their livelihood and survival. This inter-caste relationship is known as **Jajmani** (patron-client) relationship. The upper caste beneficiaries are extremely reluctant to give up this system and that in turn leaves, even today, millions in poverty and destitution (**'Social Constraints to Eliminating Hunger'** presented at the Consultation on "Towards Hunger Free India – Count – Down from 2007" organized by the United Nations World Food Programme, New Delhi, 4-5 April 2003. by *George Mathew*, Director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi)

Birth based classification: India vis-à-vis other Nations

In the broadest sense, some rigid birth based occupationally defined societies include South Africa during the era of apartheid, the antebellum South of the United States through the Civil Rights movement, colonial Latin America under Spanish and Portuguese rule, and India prior to 1947. However, a difference arises when comparing caste-like systems in other countries to India. In the other countries, the separation between one group and the other was usually along racial lines. Within India, the four major groups are further bifurcated into hundreds of sub-divisions. In Southern India, based on "occupation" they are as follows: Carpenters are ASAARI, goldsmiths are THATTAAN, coppersmiths are MUUSAARI, ironsmiths are KARUVAN, washerwomen are MANNAN, and cobblers are PARAYAN and so on. Usually they are within similar ethnic groups that shared the same language, traditions, and religion. Endogamous marriage including polyandry, and even association within caste was enforced strongly and along social and religious lines. For instance, until the recent century, many Brahmins would not allow **Dalits** to touch them or would wash themselves or their possessions if it had been touched by Dalits (Untouchables). Based on this system there was also a practice to define the distance at which one can keep from person of another caste. As a result of this,

children who came from school where children of all castes were present had to bathe in running water before entrance to their home. In some parts of India this is still practiced.

Jati vis-a-vis Varna

Nowhere is caste better exemplified by degree of complexity and systematic operation than in India. The Indian term for sub-caste is jati, which generally designates a group varying in size from a handful to many hundred and thousands of people. There are several jatis, and each has its own distinctive rules and regulations, customs and traditions, and modes of governing. The term varna (literally meaning "color") refers to the ancient and somewhat ideal fourfold division of Hindu society (briefly defined earlier in the chapter) with the Brahmans, the priestly and learned top most group followed by the Kshatriyas, who are the rulers and warriors. The third level in the hierarchy comprises of the Vaisyas who are agriculturists and merchants by profession and last of all were the Sudras, these were the peasants and laborers. Below the category of Sudras were the untouchables, or Panchamas (literally "fifth division"), who performed the most menial tasks. They were at the lowest rung of the society. Sometimes, the untouchables are kept out of the varna model.

Although there has been much confusion and intermixing between jati and varna, they are different in origin also in function. The various castes in any region of India are hierarchically organized, with each caste corresponding to one or the other varna category. Traditionally, caste mobility has taken the form of movement up or down the varna scale. Indian castes are rigidly differentiated by rituals and beliefs that pervade all thought and conduct. Extreme upper and lower castes differ very vastly in day to day course, habits of everyday life and eating, worship and marriage ceremonies.

There are literally thousands of subcastes in India, often with particular geographical ranges, occupational specializations, and an administrative or corporate structure.

When Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian revolutionist, social reformer and freedom fighter, wanted to go to England to study law, he had to ask his subcaste, the Modh Bania, for permission to leave India. ("Bania", means "merchant," and "Gandhi" means "greengrocer" -- from gandha, "smell, fragrance," in Sanskrit -- and hence Gandhi was a Vaishya.) Sometimes it is denied that the varnas are "castes" because, while "true" castes, the jatis, are based on birth, the varnas are based on the theory of the gunas (the "three powers" as mentioned in the Gita). This is no more than a rationalization: the varnas came first, and they are based on birth whereas the gunas came later, associated with both twice born and once born, caste and outcaste. Nevertheless, the varnas are now divisions at a theoretical level, while the jatis are the way in which caste is embodied for most practical purposes. Jatis themselves can be ranked in relation to each other, and occasionally a question may even be raised about the proper varna to which a particular jati belongs. As jati members change occupations and they rise in prestige, a jati may rarely even be elevated in the varna to which it is regarded as belonging.

Egalitarian Societies

Although there is some sort of division among all groups, be it based upon age, gender and division of work, there exists non-stratified societies which have elementary division maintaining a balance of work and harmony among the group rather than strictly defined demarcations leading to prejudice. Non-stratified egalitarian societies exist which have little or no concept of social hierarchy, political or economic status, class, or even permanent leadership. The best examples of egalitarian cultures all have **hunter-gatherer** economies, although not all hunter-gatherers can be considered egalitarian. Egalitarian societies maintain a balance and equilibrium of work in relationships rather than a division and concept of purity and pollution and discrimination. The **peasant societies** were also predominantly egalitarian by nature.

Anthropologists identify egalitarian cultures as "Kinship-oriented," because they value social harmony more than wealth or status. These are contrasted with economically-oriented cultures, the so called *Developed Nations*, including USA where status is prized, and stratification, competition, and conflict is common. Kinship-oriented cultures actively work to prevent social hierarchies from developing which could lead to conflict and instability. An example is the Indigenous Australians of Northwest who have arranged their entire society, spirituality, and economy around a kind of gift economy called renunciation. In this arrangement, every person is expected to give everything of any consumable resource they have to any other person who needs or lacks it at the time. This has the benefit of largely eliminating social problems like theft and relative poverty.

Social Stratification in other parts of the world

Casta is a 17th century term used in Mexico, referring to the institutionalized system of racial and social stratification and segregation based on a person's heritage. The main four levels were: 1) *Peninsulares*: People of Spanish or Portuguese descent born in Spain or Portugal. They were considered so much higher than other castas. These people had important jobs in the government, the army, and the Catholic Church they usually did not live permanently in Latin America.; 2) *Criollos (Creoles)*: People of Spanish or Portuguese descent but had been born in Latin America. Many criollos owned mines, ranches, and were very wealthy. They occasionally had government jobs, but they were not respected by the peninsulares; 3) *Mestizos*: This was the largest group and comprised everyone with Native American blood that did not have African blood; 4) *Mulatos (Mulattoes)*: These were people that had African blood. Each caste has its own set of privileges or restrictions.²

THE HINDU JAJMANI SYSTEM : Detail Description

According to Dumont and Pocock, "the key stone in any Jajmani system is the dominant caste." The jajman was a landowner or cultivator. All other castes were his economic dependents. Thus even the community that was kept at the top of the caste hierarchy was the servant of jajmans and according to Cohn's observation fed by them.

² For more details refer: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste>

During the 1930's and 1940's, the most widely held prevalent mode among patron-client relation was one in which particular households of artisan, servicing and labouring groups were rewarded by their landowning patrons with agreed upon quantities of grain. The relationship was dyadic, between the patron and the client, and each region had its own term to denote it. The first anthropologist to provide a full description of it was W H Wiser who studied a village in the Hindi region and wrote about in a book titled *The Hindu Jajmani System* [Wiser 1936]. Wiser considered the system to be one of great antiquity and traced its origins to the laws of Manu. Willian Wiser coined the term 'Jajmani System' to denote client-patron dyadic relation. He used to hindi word to describe the patrons as 'Jajmans' or 'Yajamana' and clients as 'Kamins'. However, Wiser's assumptions were refuted by the political scientist, Peter Mayer in 1993 on an extensively researched paper entitled, 'Inventing Village Tradition: The Late 19th Century Origins of the Jajmani System' [Mayer 1993:357-95]. He wrote: "I argue that the jajmani system is of relatively recent origin and is essentially a feature of the Gangetic plain". He pointed out that the system became popular only in the latter half of the 19th century. Two forces of change converged to facilitate the emergence of jajmani: the first of these was the growing partition of zamindari and bhaiyacharya villages into individual holdings, the second was the mounting pressure on landholders to offer significant incentives to village artisans to retain their services. Mayer seems to assume that all over the Gangetic plain, all land in villages was owned either by a body of agnatically related males (bhaiyacharya or biradri) or by a zamindar, with the result that artisans and others served the entire village and not the households of individual landowners. The relationship between artisan and servicing castes was 'demi-urge' a la Max Weber and became dyadic only at a later stage when land came to be owned by individuals.³

Origin

The origins of the word 'jajmani' are to be found in the Sanskrit word 'yajman', meaning the one who employs a Brahmin priest to offer a sacrifice. In his *'The Caste System of Northern India'* Blunt (1931:242), virtually repeating the words of his report of 1912, notes: *The jajmans of a Brahman priest are his parishioners. . . . Similarly, Chamars, Doms, Dafalis, Bhats, Nais, Bhangis, Barhais, and Lohars all have their jajmani, or clientele, from whom they receive fixed dues in return for regular service. . . . These jajmanis are valuable sources of income, both heritable and transferable: they are strictly demarcated, and the crime of poaching on a fellow casteman's jajmani is bitterly resented.* Beidelman's (1959: 6) formulated that the jajmani system is *a 'system of hereditary obligations of payment and of occupational and ceremonial duties between two or more specific families of different castes in the same locality'*. The irreducible essence of the jajmani relationship is the exclusive property right possessed by a member of an artisan or servant caste to serve a specific patron family. Wiser's account of the jajmani system, presented in *Behind Mud Walls* in 1930, (Wiser and Wiser: 1963) is one of the earliest account of the system and William H. Wiser's monograph *The Hindu Jajmani System* which was published in 1936 was the first systematic scholarly treatment of the topic.

³ M. N. Srinivas: 'An obituary on caste as a system' EPW special article Feb 01, 2003

Beidelman (1959:2) concurs: 'I have,' he says, 'found no author previous to Wiser's book who uses the phrase "jajmani system" '. Blunt notes that though jajmani refers literally to one who offers a sacrifice 'it is now extended to include a client of any kind'. 'These circles of constituents are valuable sources of income, heritable and transferable. . . and as such they are strictly demarcated and to poach upon a fellow casteman's preserve is an action bitterly resented.' The very earliest reference to the modern use of the term jajman to refer to any patron is that given in H. H. Wilson's A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms. . . (Wilson: 1855). Wilson (1855: 226) defines jajman as follows:

*A person who employs and fees Brahmans for the performance of any solemn or religious ceremony; as it is not unusual for the relation between the employer and those employed to become hereditary, the latter come to regard the former as their pupils or clients, and claim as their right and due the fees that are to be paid on such occasions, although they should not perform the ceremonies: from religious, the term passed to very miscellaneous relations, and barbers, washermen, and sweepers claim, in some parts of Hindustan, a prescriptive or hereditary right to be employed and paid by certain individuals, whom they therefore style their Jajmans.*⁴

The Jajman-Kamin Relation

In India, a classic feature of rural social organization has been the *jajmani* relations, whereby landowners, small or large, operate with a clear and strong group interest, and are the patrons of the landless. Jajmani is basically a client-patron relationship. The jajmani system basically functioned to maintain a status quo in society. It is a reciprocal system of exchange of goods and services mainly in kind rather than credit. However, it exceeds the process of exchange, there is a bonding and relationship which builds up and harbors and a mode of reverence and loyalties is developed which is passed on down the generations and the jajman-artisian relation is maintained over decades.

Jajmani system is based on the reciprocal behavior of occupational service and security. With time, occupations change thereby leading the jajmani system to fizzle out. Industrialization, Green revolution, White revolution has led to the degrading of the jajmani relationships among people.

DYNAMICS OF RURAL SOCIETY AND THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Social change comes into play as no society is stagnant and change is the only thing consistent in life. Traditions and occupations categorized people into the general masses and the exceptionally skilled dominant few individuals.

⁴ See : 'Inventing Village Tradition: The late 19th Century Origins of the North Indian 'jajmani System' ' PETER MAYER in *Modern Asian Studies*, 27,2 (1993), pp. 357-395. Printed in Great Britain. See : http://www.arts.adelaide.edu.au/historypolitics/people/politics/Jajmani_system.pdf

Sanskritization

The concept of Sanskritisation was coined by M.N.Srinivas, in interpreting social relationships, hierarchy and social structure in more indigenous terms. Caste system was the stratification of the Indian society. Caste differentiation is a unit of social interaction. It also gives an account of the productive organization of a village in terms of the land owning caste vis-à-vis the landless people, the power structure prevailing with the dominant caste vis-à-vis the dependents. The dominant caste structure and sanskritisation existed in both the Indian villages and the townships. There is an economic stratification, which also extends to political and ritual domains. The concept of Sanskritisation and Westernization were the initial attempts to define the processes of change and mobility, taking place in the Indian society. These concepts were popularized by M.N.Srinivas. **Westernization** implies change resulting from cultural contact with the West, particularly Great Britain. Srinivas defines Sanskritisation 'as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (dwija) caste. The Sanskritisation of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy. It normally presupposes either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned or a higher group self-consciousness resulting from its contact with a source of the 'great tradition' of Hinduism such as pilgrim center or monastery (M.N.Srinivas 1966:67-8). Castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. Srinivas defined sanskritisation as a process by which "a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently 'twice-born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community..." One clear example of sanskritisation is the adoption, in emulation of the practice of twice-born castes, of vegetarianism by people belonging to the so-called "low castes" who are traditionally not averse to non-vegetarian food. The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. According to M.N. Srinivas, Sanskritization is not just the adoption of new customs and habits, but also includes exposure to new ideas and values appearing in Sanskrit literature. He says the words Karma, dharma, papa, maya, samsara and moksha are the most common Sanskritic theological ideas which become common in the talk of people who are sanskritized.⁵ **Brahamization** is a term used by Srinivas, earlier, to describe the process wherein the castes lower in hierarchy imitated the cultural and ritual practices of the Brahmins (See, M N Srinivas 1952)

⁵ Caste in Modern India; And other essays: Page 48. (Media Promoters & Publishers Pvt. Ltd, Bombay; First Published: 1962, 11th Reprint: 1994)

Indian village as a unity and extension

Although jati and other divisional groups are mainly among the Hindu religious group, these are present among other religious as well. The division of the Indian people into tribe, caste and sect are not absolute but relative in the sense that, unlike in North America and Australia for example, the tribal people in India have always coexisted and had mutual interaction with non-tribal people of Hindu and Non-Hindu castes and with sectarian influences often emanating from Hinduism. This is the main reason why tribal religions and Hinduism have to be viewed as a continuum rather than as separate entities. C. Von Furer Haimendorf points out to the 'unity in diversity', which characterizes the Indian caste system in its local setting. Each caste has, for sure, its own culture in matters of diet, rituals and ceremonies, code of conduct etc. but all castes in a local or regional setting despite their differences- constitute a coherent and interdependent system. Thus the Indian cultural genius makes for the co-existence of individuality and collectivity. It is the same cultural logic, which comes into play when relations between tribals and non-tribals in the religious sphere are considered. The tribe-caste-sect continuum, it would have become clear by now, is not a creation of contemporary history in India but a civilizational characteristic. In this respect, Milton Singer has spoken of the orthogenetic and heterogenetic dimensions or aspects of the Indian civilizational process. This process is best understood as a reciprocal process of interaction between a **Great Tradition and Little Traditions** in the course of the millennia of Indian history.

The Great Tradition and Little Tradition

The **Great Tradition** refers to the reflective tradition of the intelligentsia, much of the scriptural knowledge and the product of the thought of the cognoscenti. It is the tradition of the learned few, mainly the urbanites. **Little traditions**, on the other hand, belong to the many, the masses, the unreflective folk ideas and practices of mainly rural people. The interaction between these two kinds of tradition has been linked to the process of cloud formation from the small rivulets, streams and the sea by the action of the sun, and the same clouds raining back on the various sources of water. The interaction in the context of the indigenous village communities in India in relation to the civilizational process was explained by McKim Marriott in terms of **parochialization and universalization of culture**. Thus, when a sister ties the sacred rakhi on the wrist of her brother at the north Indian festival called saluno (or raksha bandhan) this is part of **the little traditions**. But when the same symbolic device was used in medieval India to cement the ties between Moghul emperors and the Rajput this was **universalization**.

Universalisation and Parochialisation

Orthogenetic and heterogenetic culture change in Indian tradition (explained by Singer) are the two processes which have been constantly interacting (and hence they are not to be used as a mode of classifying the Indian tradition into compartments), the accent in the former is on endogenous rooted tradition and change and in the latter on imported foreign tradition and change. The combined operation of orthogenetic and heterogenetic dynamics of cultural process and change enables us to grasp, analytically, the fact that all modernity in India is not isomorphic with Islamization or Westernization. Indeed, one may distinguish between

modernity, which is a reciprocal, symmetrical and intercultural process, and modernization, which signifies one-way, asymmetrical, and acculturation process. The well-known process of ‘**Sanskritization**’ authored by M.N. Srinivas falls into the latter category whereas Marriott’s delineation of **universalization** belongs to the former, intercultural, rather than acculturational category. In the process delineated by Marriott, orthogenetic dynamics is primary and the heterogenetic is secondary, while in the Srinivas characterization of sanskritization heterogenetic processes overtake the orthogenetic ones. This is an interpretation which is at variance with Singer’s where sanskritization is considered orthogenetic while an altogether separate ritual behaviour termed compartmentalization is regarded by him as heterogenetic. Perhaps the most comprehensive and influential theory linking the Indian caste system to religion, as an opposition between the **pure and the impure**, is that of Louis Dumont (**Homo Hierarchicus** by L. Dumont). Dumont emphasizes the encompassing capacity of religious values in Indian social structure whereby temporal power is made subservient to ritual status. This is a characteristic primarily of the Hindu social structure and world-view.

Dumont’s concept of Homo Hierarchicus

Homo hierarchicus is the core and substantive aspect of the social grouping. The concept of purity vs. pollution, which is the essence of the caste system, is governed by interpersonal relations being defined in terms of blood, occupation and also by rituals. It is obligatory for each Hindu caste to confine his or her relation and interaction within the restricted group called ‘Jati’ so as to maintain purity in marriage relationships, breeding, in exchange of food, and in pursuit of occupation etc.⁶ Louis Dumont describes hierarchical ideology encrusted in ancient religious texts which are revealed as the governing conception of the contemporary caste structure. On yet another plane of analysis, *homo hierarchicus* is contrasted with his modern Western antithesis, *homo aequalis*. the unity of purity and pollution - gives us the *ground* of caste as a totality or system.⁷

The all embracing nature of religious-based hierarchy grounded in the opposition between the pure and the impure is strikingly revealed in the manner in which sects, including the heterodox ones, those formed in opposition to hierarchical Hinduism, have not remained unaffected by the caste system. Dumont’s theory of the formation of sects in Indian society can be summarized briefly. In India while the social system has been regulated by caste hierarchy, novel and heterodox religious ideas and commensurate social structure have been the product of the thought of renouncers. The renouncer (sanyasin) in the Indian civilization has been characterized as the ‘individual-outside the world’ in opposition to ‘man in the social world’ (of caste). The individualistic thought of the renouncers – whether of Buddha, Mahavir, Ramakrishna Paramhansa have given rise to sects. The membership of the sect cuts across tribal and caste differences though Dumont demonstrates on the basis of Indian socio-religious history how the sects have either developed caste-like grades within themselves or become interpenetrated by the local and regional caste systems of their milieu.

⁶ Refer: Caste and democratic politics in India, ed by. Ghanshyam Shah, pg 17

⁷ See Dumont, Louis **Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications**. Complete English edition, revised. 540 p. 1970, 1980 Series: (NHS) Nature of Human Society

Thus the Lingayats of Karnataka behave like a caste and the Jains all over India have developed within this community caste-like grades. They also practice endogamy in consociation with the local and regional Hindu castes (e.g. the Bania in North India) or sub-castes.

Equality

In India, the concept of equality is mainly referred to in the context of the disparities created by the caste system. Of course, social inequality is manifested in a number of ways. The rich and the poor, landowners and landless labourers, capitalists and workers, educated and uneducated, employed and unemployed, men and women, modern and backward. In addition, there always are 'internal' inequalities among the rich, as also among the workers at various strata and the farmers at various levels. For example, in terms of the Supreme Court's judgment, there is a 'creamy layer' among the OBC's also. Further, not all BC castes are equal nor are all OBC's on the same level or in the same class.

The issue of equality in a society with a class-based hierarchy and that in a society with multiplicity/inequality among various castes are qualitatively different from each other. Manu gave only the essentials of the four Varnas. Manusmriti does not envisage the hierarchical arrangement of Chitpawans, Deshasthas (Yajurved or Rigved), Karhades in the Brahmins among the Savarnas. (Chitpawans cannot have existed at all in the time of Manu.) Similarly there is no question of there being the division of the Five-kuli, Ninety-six-Kuli Marathas in Manu's time. Every caste has created such hierarchy on its own. Even though the inequality in it is called as 'casteist', it has no place in the caste system. But everybody including the Marathas and the Brahmins has experienced how sharp such divisions within a caste can be. The respective sections of the society have seen a few years ago the explosive nature of a marriage between a Chitpawan and a Deshastha or between a Five-kuli and a Ninety-six-kuli Maratha or between a Mahar families with and without Watan. Very recently the caste Panchayat in a village in Bihar sentenced a Jat boy and his Jatav mate to death and hanged them in front of all because he fell in love with her. Similar stories are also heard among a Dalit and non –Dalit alliance. Manusmriti does not contain the rules governing such inequalities. Therefore hanging Manu for our recent crimes is not going to end the caste system, leave alone getting rid of disparities to establish equality. Further, if the 'upper' level of the caste is buttressed by higher class also, the result is a special blend of snobbery. The higher class people may be of lower caste but enjoy a high status in society today and are well respected.

Social hierarchy subsequent to 1947 Independence

The occupational barriers among Indian varnas have been breaking down slowly under economic pressures since the 19th century, but social distinctions have been more persistent. Attitudes toward the untouchables only began to change in the 1930s under the influence of Mohandas Gandhi's teachings and also by B.R Amedkar's views. Although untouchability was declared illegal in 1949, resistance to change has remained strong, especially in rural areas. As increased industrialization produced new occupations and new social and political functions

evolved, the caste system adapted them and thus far has not been abolished. There have been modifications in the occupation of various caste people but the system continues.

Social Mobilization and Social Change

Social mobilization and its political containment appear to have taken place in India as two independent but ultimately convergent processes. While the pace of social change has been accelerated through social reform legislation, recruitment of new social elites into the political arena and the political mobilization through electoral participation, their overall impact on the stability of the political system has been moderated by the existence of political intermediaries and parties at the regional and local levels. The process has been described by Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph as *vertical*, *differential* and *horizontal* mobilization. **Vertical mobilization** refers to political linkages that draw on and reinforce social and economic dominance. **Horizontal mobilization** takes place when people situated at the same social and economic level get together to use their combined political strength to improve their situation. **Differential mobilization** refers to coalitions that cut across social strata.⁸ Established Jajmani systems – reciprocal social bonds based on the exchange of service and occupational specialization- broke down to create new groupings and caste associations, based on shared social and economic interests emerged as links between parties and the society. This has created a useful room to maneuver in the middle in the hands of national, regional and local elites. These innovations have been possible in India inter alia because of the growth of a political culture based on bargaining and a competitive party system that could act as an agent of social change without disturbing political stability (see Mitra, Subrata: Caste, Democracy and the Politics of Community Formation in India, in: Mary Searle Chatterjee/ Ursula Sharma (eds), Contextualising Caste: Post-Dumontian Approaches, Blackwell/The Sociological Review: 1994, pp.49-72)⁹

Upward Mobility

Although caste hierarchy are a rigid and closed system, whereby the caste group is assigned by birth, there exists upward mobility among castes. Rising on the ritual hierarchy can only be achieved by a caste as a group, over a long period of time, principally by adopting behavior patterns of higher-ranked groups. This process, known as **Sanskritization** [explained in detail earlier in this chapter], has been described by M.N. Srinivas et al.

In the early 19th century, M. K. Gandhi tried to uplift the untouchables by naming them 'Harijans', meaning 'Men of God'. Dr. Ambedkar, also fought for the uplift-ment of the down trodden, he himself got converted to Buddhism four years before his death in 1956. Millions of Dalits embraced the faith of the Buddha. Over the past few centuries, many Dalits have also converted to Christianity and have often by this means raised their socioeconomic status.

CASTE SYSTEM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

⁸ Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, Chicago 1967.

⁹ Subrata K. Mitra "Democracy and Governance in India: A Neo-Institutional Approach"

A caste system is a social system where people are ranked into groups based on heredity within rigid systems of social stratification. Some scholars, in fact, deny that true caste systems are found outside India. The caste is a closed group whose members are severely restricted in their choice of occupation and degree of social participation. Marriage outside the caste is prohibited. Endogamy is by far the only mode of finding a spouse. Social status is determined by the caste of one's birth and may only rarely be transcended. Certain religious minorities may voluntarily constitute a quasi-caste within a society, but they are less apt to be characterized by cultural distinctiveness than by their self-imposed social segregation. In general, caste functions to maintain the status quo in a society. An equilibrium is maintained in society by stratification of occupations among various castes.

The caste system is still prevalent in India in all pockets in rural areas. Today there are about 250 million Untouchables. Caste discrimination has been against the law since 1950, but prejudice continues. The United Nations estimates that there are 115 million child laborers and 300 million starving people in India, most of which are poor and untouchables. Government programs and quotas have tried to raise the living standards of Untouchables by reserving places in the legislature, government jobs, schools and colleges. Urbanization, economic development, and industrialization benefit them by breaking down caste barriers, as change in the nature of jobs and employments help in cutting across traditional occupation and thereby cutting the associated customs and prejudices.. In the urban areas, basically in cities of India, members of different castes are constantly in close contact and are therefore bound to interact with one another which help to weaken the strict rules of the caste system to some extent.

Untouchables have also become a strong and organized political force who refers to themselves as Dalits. The Dalits were the 'oppressed' caste who, over the years have swelled in numbers and also have gained strength as to fight against discrimination to them by the dominant upper castes.

In a recent interview with Emily Guntheinz, Arundhati Roy was asked to comment on the caste system. Her reply follows:

It's the defining consideration in all Indian politics, in all Indian marriages...The lines are blurring. India exists in several centuries simultaneously. So there are those of us like me, or people that I know for instance, to whom it means nothing...It's a very strange situation where there's sort of a gap between...sometimes it's urban and rural, but it's really a time warp. (Roy, Arundhati., The God of Small Things. New York: Random, 1997.)

Social Stratification

Social stratification is a term used to denote the hierarchical arrangement of social classes, castes, and strata within a society. While these hierarchies are not universal to all societies, they are the norm among quite some cultures. Proponents of structural-functional analysis suggest that since social stratification exists in all societies, a hierarchy must therefore be beneficial in helping to stabilize their existence. Conflict theorists consider the inaccessibility of resources and lack of social mobility in many stratified societies. They conclude, often working from the theories of Karl Marx that stratification means that working class people are not likely to advance socio-economically, while the wealthy may continue to exploit the proletariat generation after generation. However, some conflict theorists, mainly Weber and his

followers also critique Marx's view and point out that social stratification is not purely based on economic inequalities but is equally shaped by status and power differentials. They proceed to examine the basis and structure of stratification in society along all the three axes.

Max Weber formulated a three-component theory of stratification, with class, status and party (or politics) as conceptually distinct elements.

- Social class is based on economically determined relationship to the market (owner, renter, employee etc.)
- Status is based on non-economical qualities like honour, prestige and religion.
- Party refers to factors having to do with affiliations in the political domain.¹⁰

Practical Functionality of Caste System at Village level

This kind of differentiation has reached such alarming proportions in our country that a Brahmin from one state does not trust another Brahmin from a different state. The Nambudris of Kerala look down upon any other Brahmin. Same is the case with the backward castes. Some established Dalits consider the followers of Kanshi Ram as 'inferior'. A Jat boy from Punjab will not marry a Jat girl from Uttar Pradesh and Patels from Kutch are not going to call the Patels from Ahmedabad as their own.

The policy of reservation was put forward with a view to eliminating the caste-based inequalities in our society. But this criterion can apply only to economic disparities. It has not been able to remove cultural inequalities.

The teachings of all religions, the constitutions in all States and the policies of almost all political parties embrace the concept of 'equality'; in spite of which this inequality has not been removed. This should not construe to mean that the hatred, the disparity are curses of the Human society. It only means that the struggle for 'equality' is indeed very long and is not as easy as it appears to be. If the 'progressive Brahmins', the 'Dalit rebels' and the 'communist revolutionaries' come to realise this much, the tendency to make political capital of the inequalities among castes will be checked.

So, as per the true Indian snap, absolute equality is an impossible deal. Human beings differ in their basic abilities, level of education, designation, strength, capabilities, skills, attitudes etc. When such differences exist, it is the myth to have absolute equality. However it should be ensured that the element of inequality must be reasonable and well justified we can say that the aim of equality is to prevent arbitrary discrimination

In the Jajman- Kamin relationship, based on economic transactions and service, there was a minimal use of revenue. Service and labour were rewarded with grain, or grain producing land and economic relations were an integral part of more inclusive bonds. Production was local; subsistence oriented, and occurred in a hierarchical fashion wherein, usually the artisan and

¹⁰ Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India by MN Srinivas, Page 32 (Oxford, 1952)

servicing castes being paid with grain at the annual harvest and the rate and quantity of grain was determined by local customs. Members of the serving castes such as the barber and washerman had roles in life-cycle rituals. Various chores were divided among various people rendering services in the landowning patron's household called 'Kamins' for the higher caste Patrons i.e. 'Jajmans'. In other words, economic relations were embedded in social bondings sanctioned by custom and morality. Relationships between patrons and clients in the village were multi-stranded and durable. Durability itself was valued, and relationships often continued over generations. This applied not only to friendly dealings but also to antagonistic ones. One inherited one's friends as well as foes. The liabilities and assets both were embraced in the jajman-kamin relationship.

However, the relatively balanced system of living of the jajman- kamin relationship started to be exploited at the village level during the british rule and thereafter and gave rise to indebtedness and bonded labour.

Indebtedness and Bonded labour

Indebtedness was a termite which ate away the happiness of families. Started as a system of give and take, it led generations to provide free service, took away their immovable assets and brought them to lower levels of poverty. Landowners had, besides tenants and sharecroppers, a few servants who worked as bonded labourers. These people were in subordinate positions. A bonded labourer generally spent years working for the master in return to payment of debt which he, his father, or other family member, had borrowed from the landowner. Such relationships also frequently continued from one generation to the next. Bonded labour was legally theoretically banned in 1976, but manages to continue in some places clandestinely. The four categories – Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaish and the sudras performed occupational tasks assigned to them thereby balancing the society, its needs and maintain the cultural system, however indebtedness, services for generation in return to providing economic transactions, took an evil turn in this previously relatively balanced social system.

Later conceptualized was a fifth category, "Untouchable" menials, relegated to carrying out very menial and polluting work related to bodily decay and dirt. Since 1935 "Untouchables" have been known as Scheduled Castes, referring to their listing on government rosters, or schedules. They are also often called by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as Harijans, or "Children of God". According to the 1991 census, there were 138 million Scheduled Caste members in India, approximately 16 percent of the total population. As per 2001 census the figure reports approximately 166 million Schedule Castes in the Indian sub-continent which maintains the 16 percent division over decades.

The first four varnas apparently existed in the ancient Aryan society of northern India. Some historians say that these categories were originally somewhat fluid functional groups, not castes. A greater degree of fixity gradually developed, resulting in the complex ranking systems of medieval India that essentially continue in the late twentieth century.

Each caste is believed by devout Hindus to have its own dharma, or divinely ordained code of proper conduct. Accordingly, there is often a high degree of tolerance for divergent lifestyles

among different castes. Brahmins are usually expected to be nonviolent and spiritual, according with their traditional roles as vegetarian teetotaler priests. Kshatriyas are supposed to be strong, as fighters and rulers should be, with a taste for aggression, eating meat, and drinking alcohol. Vaishyas are stereotyped as adept businessmen, in accord with their traditional activities in commerce. Shudras are often described by others as tolerably pleasant but expectably somewhat base in behavior, whereas Dalits--especially Sweepers--are often regarded by others as followers of vulgar life-styles. Conversely, lower-caste people often view people of high rank as haughty and heartless with arrogance and ego.

The existence of rigid ranking is supernaturally validated through the idea of rebirth according to a person's karma, the sum of an individual's deeds in this life and in past lives. After death, a person's life is judged by divine forces, and rebirth is assigned in a high or a low place, depending upon what is deserved. This supernatural sanction can never be neglected, because it brings a person to his or her position in the caste hierarchy, relevant to every transaction involving food or drink, speaking, or touching.

In past decades, Dalits in certain areas (especially in parts of the south) had to display extreme deference to higher caste people, physically keeping their distance lest their touch or even their shadow pollute others. They were forbidden to wear shoes in the presence of upper castes. The lowest-ranking had to jingle a little bell in warning of their polluting approach. In much of India, Dalits were prohibited from entering temples, using wells from which the "clean" castes drew their water, or even attending schools. Such degrading discrimination was made illegal under legislation passed during British rule and was protested against by preindependence reform movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji (B.R.) Ambedkar, a Dalit leader. After independence, Ambedkar almost singlehandedly wrote India's constitution, including key provisions barring caste-based discrimination. The discriminatory treatment of Dalits still prevails, especially in villages.

Inter-Caste Relations

In villages and townships, members of different caste groups are often linked to each other in what is called the *jajmani* system, after the word *jajman*, which in some regions means patron. Members of various service castes perform tasks for their patrons, patrons are dominant, and powerful landowning caste of the village. Households of service castes are linked through hereditary bonds to a household of patrons, with the lower-caste members providing services according to traditional occupational specializations. Thus, client families of launderers, barbers, shoemakers, carpenters, potters, tailors, and priests provide customary services to their patrons, in return for which they receive customary seasonal payments of grain, clothing, and money. Ideally, from generation to generation, clients owe their patrons, service and labor, whereas patrons owe their clients protection and security.

The harmonious qualities of the *jajmani* system have been over idealized and variations of the system overlooked by many observers. Further, the economic interdependence of the system has weakened since the 1960s. Nevertheless, it is clear that members of different castes customarily perform a number of functions for one another in rural India that emphasizes cooperation rather than competition. This cooperation is revealed in economic arrangements, in

visits to farmers' threshing floors by service caste members to claim traditional payments, and in rituals emphasizing interdependence at life crises and festivals all over South Asia. For example, in rural Karnataka, in an event described by anthropologist Suzanne Hanchett, the annual procession of the village temple cart bearing images of the deities responsible for the welfare of the village cannot go forward without the combined efforts of representatives of all castes. It is believed that the sacred cart will literally not move unless all work together to move it, some pushes and some pulling.

In many parts of India, land is largely held by dominant castes--high-ranking owners of property--that economically exploit low-ranking landless laborers and poor artisans, all the while degrading them with ritual emphases on their so-called god-given inferior status. In the early 1990s, blatant subjugation of low-caste laborers in the northern state of Bihar and in eastern Uttar Pradesh was the subject of many news reports. In this region, scores of Dalits who have attempted to unite to protest low wages have been the victims of lynchings and mass killings by high-caste landowners and their hired assassins.

In 1991 the news magazine *India Today* reported that in an ostensibly prosperous village about 160 kilometers southeast of Delhi, when it became known that a rural Dalit laborer dared to have a love affair with the daughter of a high-caste landlord, the lovers and their Dalit go-between were tortured, publicly hanged, and burnt by agents of the girl's family in the presence of some 500 villagers. A similar incident occurred in 1994, when a Dalit musician who had secretly married a woman of the Kurmi cultivating caste was beaten to death by outraged Kurmis, possibly instigated by the young woman's family. Many other atrocities, as well as urban riots resulting in the deaths of Dalits, have occurred in recent years. Many more cases of Dalits and non-Dalit alliances ending in tragic incidents have taken place in the years thereafter. In rural India, closed caste system still prevails and laws are broken by members of the caste thereby torturing those who dare to break the caste hierarchy.

Jajmani system in Contemporary Era

The replacement of the traditional, grain-based subsistence economy bound up inextricably with castewise division of labour, happened over a period of nearly two hundred years beginning with the establishment of British rule in India which brought a host of new technologies, ushered in new institutions, and radically transformed some old ones. Modern knowledge, the ideal of equity of human beings before the law, democracy, and human dignity were a few of the new ideas. What is perhaps even more important, after India became independent in 1947, the new government of India pursued with determination the goals of democracy, equality of all citizens before the law and, in turn, the goals of development and social justice. The single most important engine of India's social revolution has been democracy based on adult franchise [Srinivas 1996]. Even though many nations are characterized by social inequality, perhaps nowhere else in the world has inequality been so elaborate and rigidly defined as in the Indian institution of 'the caste'. Caste has long existed in India. Caste has undergone significant change since independence, but it still involves hundreds of millions of people, it is not abolished although various measures have been taken and laws made to uproot the caste system. In its preamble, India's constitution forbids negative public discrimination on the basis of caste. However, caste ranking and caste-based interaction

have occurred for centuries and will continue to do so well into the foreseeable future, more in the countryside than in urban settings and more in the realms of kinship and marriage (endogamy) than in less personal interactions.

Members of higher-ranking castes tend, on the whole, to be more prosperous than members of lower-ranking castes. Many lower-caste people live in conditions of great poverty and social disadvantage.

The Indian constitution guarantees basic rights to all its citizens, including the right to equality and equal protection before the law. The practice of untouchability, as well as discrimination on the basis of caste, race, sex, or religion, has been legally abolished. All citizens have the right to vote, and political competition is lively. Voters from every stratum of society have formed interest groups, overlapping and crosscutting castes, creating an evolving new style of integrating Indian society.

Castes themselves, however, far from being abolished, have certain rights under Indian law. As described by anthropologist Owen M. Lynch and other scholars, in the expanding political arena caste groups are becoming more politicized and forced to compete with other interest groups for social and economic benefits. In the growing cities, traditional intercaste interdependencies are negligible.

Independent India has built on earlier British efforts to remedy problems suffered by Dalits by granting them some benefits of protective discrimination. Scheduled Castes are entitled to reserved electoral offices, reserved jobs in central and state governments, and special educational benefits. The constitution mandates that one-seventh of state and national legislative seats be reserved for members of Scheduled Castes in order to guarantee their voice in government. Reserving seats has proven useful because few, if any, Scheduled Caste candidates have ever been elected in non-reserved constituencies.

Green revolution

The Green revolution brought in changes in lifestyles. Sugar replaced gur, rubber tyres replaced wooden tyres, mud pots with aluminum steel pans, barber and washer man had to change their working styles with the coming of shaver blades and washing machines and also soap and detergents etc. The effects of these changes which began with what has been called the 'green revolution' in the Punjab in the late 1960s have been far more profound and wide ranging. The 'green revolution' began with Punjab farmers growing high-yielding varieties of wheat and gradually the use of high staples such as rice, bajra, jawar, maize, and ragi, and to vegetables, and fruits. The new agriculture required farmers to change the methods and techniques drastically. The new crops needed a continuous supply of water, the intensive use of fertilisers and pesticides and frequent weeding. Success in the new agriculture called for not only a mastery of the new techniques, but free access to fertilisers, pesticides and credit. While rich farmers were able to commandeer all the resources including labour, poor farmers found themselves at a great disadvantage. Lacking access to quality seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, water, and credit, they found to their utter dismay that the cultivation of hybrid seeds had rendered their knowledge of traditional methods of cultivation totally useless. The suicide of

several cotton farmers in Karnataka in 1999 reveals the negative side of the agricultural revolution.

Artisans are being challenged by expanding commercial markets in mass-produced factory goods, undercutting traditional mutual obligations between patrons and clients. The spread of the Green Revolution has tended to increase the gap between the prosperous and the poor--most of whom are low-caste.

White Revolution

The 'green revolution' has been followed by a 'white revolution' giving rise to a tremendous spurt in milk production and other dairy products. There was also a sharp increase in the production of eggs, poultry, and fish, all of which have resulted in changes in the food habits of the urban middle classes and the richer peasantry in villages. Rural prosperity during the last three decades accompanied as it has been by increased prices of foodgrains has led to rural wages going up sharply. A new class of tractor owners has emerged in the more prosperous rural areas who hire out their vehicles to farmers for ploughing. Tractor ploughing renders bullocks redundant, and if this trend becomes widespread there will be a decline in the use of cattle for agricultural and draught purposes.

A new feature of village life is the emigration of large numbers of people both seasonally and on a long-term basis. Prosperous agricultural areas are attracting labourers from poorer areas. The migration of large numbers of labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa during harvest time in Punjab and Haryana is well known. But less spectral seasonal migrations do occur from poorer to more prosperous areas all over the country. Fast growing cities also attract migrants from rural areas. The construction industry, garment and other factories, restaurants, and domestic services, all act as magnets as the rapid proliferation of the urban slums settlement testifies. Rapid population growth and the breakdown of the jajmani system are some of the 'push' factors for emigration. All in all, migration is now accepted in rural areas as a fact of life, and the development of roads and communications and ever expanding urban frontiers have facilitated this phenomenon. All in all, the social and mental space of villagers has increased considerably.

Monetisation

The improvement of communication, the spread of education, a host of governmental policies favouring the weaker sections, political mobilisation of the people, and the many technological changes referred to above have all had the effect of greatly weakening the link between jati and traditional occupations. Even where it lingers in an attenuated form, monetisation, and market forces have combined to free economic relations from the baggage which they have traditionally carried.

Bhakti movement

Bhakti movement was a prominent movement within the framework of Hinduism to fight against casteism. This movement grew from within the Hindu fold, and was characterized by a

strong anti- hierarchical and anti-ritualistic stand. Though started in Tamil Nadu, as early as 6th century BC by Shiva, Saint Kabir in N. India, Shishunal Sharif in Karnataka and Shridi Sai Baba in Maharashtra were born as or associated with the muslim religion during childhood, but were part of the Bhakti movement and highly respected by Hindus. The movement explicitly and powerfully condemned the caste system including untouchability. This movement , both in the northern Indian sub-continent and also in the southern part, saw many saint poets coming from the lower caste groups who were more prominent than the Brahmins and other upper castes in the bhakti movement. “To gain a higher rank in the caste system, they practiced what the upper caste practiced, like the sacred thread ceremony known as ‘upanayana’ even certain ‘homas’ and ‘poojas’. Such attempts are called ‘Sanskritisation’ by M.N.Srinivas.

Hinduism constantly, deliberately and consciously fought against the caste system and untouchability much before the influence of the western ideas. It surfaced first among the Tamil people during the seventh to tenth centuries AD. Bhakti saints came from all the castes and both the sexes. Two glorious examples are the **ezhavas** in **Kerala** and the **Nadars** of **Tamil Nadu**. Shree Narayana Guru (1854-1928) was a social reformer and the chief force behind elevating the social status of ezhavas. He gave three slogans which are: One caste One religion, and one God for one man, ‘ask not, say not, think not caste’, whatever be the religion , let man improve himself’. He saw the hindu caste system did not permit ezhavas and dalits entry in temples. Narayan Guru and Ghandhiji, worked together in temple entry movement. Among the Nadars, education and literacy elevated their position and they now hold a strong niche for themselves in industry and commerce and have emerged economically strong.

An important feature of the caste system was its localized system of production based on jati wise division of labour for meeting local needs rather than the needs of the larger market. The Bhakti movement gave the hope of salvation to millions of people from among low caste groups and women. The Brahmin was ridiculed for his preoccupation with ritual, and purity and impurity; and his claims to supremacy. The Bhakti saints proclaimed that a non-intellectual love of god was all that mattered.

But powerful as these movements were, they failed to make a dent on caste hierarchy, for at the village level, the system of production of foodgrains and other necessities was inextricably bound up with a caste-based division of labour. The moral is that ideological attacks on hierarchy and Brahmanical claims to supremacy failed to create an egalitarian social order since at the local level the production of basic needs was inextricably bound up with jati. It was only with the establishment of British rule and the many forces it let loose that the idea of an alternative system of production not based on caste emerged, and this acquired salience in the first few decades of the 20th century. The post-independence years have brought the country closer to a system of local production freed from a caste-based division of labour. It is the government of independent India which mounted a determined comprehensive and sustained attack on the institution and set in motion a programme of development which culminated in smashing the link between caste and traditional occupation. The jajmani system is beginning to disintegrate. In its disappearance lie the true seeds of equality.

Security of Livelihood and Employment

An important feature of caste system was its localised system of production based on jati wise division of labour for meeting local needs, rather than the needs of the larger market. As M N Srinivas explains in a posthumously published article, the base of this localised production was not necessarily a village, but a cluster of neighbouring villages, each cluster having one or more “weekly markets, where villagers and itinerant traders would gather to exchange goods, or buy paying cash. The cluster could claim a large degree of self-sufficiency as far as the production of basic needs was concerned...” [Srinivas 2003] In most parts of the India, there developed a system of making annual payments in kind or cash, as soon as harvesting was done, for services rendered by village artisans, barbers, washermen, agricultural labourers and the like. The system of payment was not on piece-work, but involved the principle that taking care of the artisans and labourers and their basic needs was the responsibility of land owning families. Whenever there were special occasions of urgent need such as marriage, the working class families were given special help. M N Srinivas refers to different names of this system in different parts of India: “jajmani in the north, bara balute in Maharashtra, ‘mirasi’ in Madras, ‘adade’ in Mysore. The relationship between the jajman and his kamin is unequal, since the latter is regarded as inferior” [Srinivas 1980:14]. The continuing tensions between land owning communities and communities which traditionally were subservient, resulting sometimes into atrocities against the latter owe their origin to this patron-client relationship and its breakdown, rather than to any canonical support to caste system. This institution in the past at least recognised the right to work and livelihood, and in the process controlled competition.

The relationship between patron and client extended beyond generations, and in the traditional system at least, it was not open to a landlord to prefer a new client merely because he charged lower for the services offered. Nor could the client seek alternative employment outside his traditional patron for a higher wage – at least not when his services were needed by his patron. It was the obligation of the patron that the client and his family did not starve. The much maligned ‘Apasthambha Dharmasutra’ even says that if an unexpected guest comes and there is limited food, the head of the family and his family members have to cut down their own food, but not that of the servants. The latter have to have their proper meal. The guest should not be fed at the expense of servants.¹¹

The system was certainly not an ideal one without blemish. All the shortcomings resulting from patron-client relationship, curbing competition and subsistence oriented production followed from the system. In conditions of frequent droughts and high political instability since the medieval age, what mattered most was food security, more than growth. Yet, even under this system, arts and crafts flourished made possible by specialisation and division of labour, especially under political patronage, as happened for example under the Vijayanagara kings and Mughal emperors. It was no wonder that caste system survived under such security. Neither the Muslim rulers nor the British interfered with the system. Many Hindus may have been converted, but the caste system was imbibed into the new religions of Islam and

¹¹ Kane, Vol I, Part 1, pp 57-58

Christianity in India, since the jajmani system and other functions of caste system had nothing to do with religion.¹²

The Declining Caste system

M N Srinivas (2003) refers to a combination of new forces in operation, responsible for the destruction of the caste system. These forces have led to the breakdown of the caste-based mode of social production in turn leading to the collapse of the caste system. The new forces are breakdown of the jajmani system, emergence of the larger market and decline of the village based subsistence production, urbanisation, and above all the rise of democracy based on adult franchise. Along with these, there is widespread acceptance of new values – equality, self-respect, and human dignity. He cites several instances of how village artisan based production has given place to factory production – mass produced edible oil replacing the oil-seed pressing caste, factory produced plastic and aluminum vessels replacing the village potter caste, urban textiles replacing the village weaver and so on. Srinivas observes significantly: “The moral is that ideological attacks on hierarchy and brahmanical claims to supremacy failed to create an egalitarian social order since at the local level the production of basic needs was intrinsically bound up with jati”¹³

The destruction of the *Jajmani* system, communal ownership of landed property, by the British and introduction of legal land relationship changed the situation of Dalits for the worse. *Jajmani* had used traditional caste relationships for division of labour and had provided some material security for them, although it was an exploitative and unjust system.¹⁴

Today the status of the Shudras, Untouchables, and other "scheduled castes," and the preferential policies that the Indian government has designed for their advancement ever since Independence, are sources of serious conflict, including suicides, murders, and riots, in Indian society. Meanwhile, however, especially since economic liberalization began in 1991, the social mobility of a modern economy and urban life has begun to disrupt traditional professions, and oppressions, even of Untouchables. Village life and economic stasis were the greatest allies of the caste system, but both are slowly retreating before modernity in an India that finally gave up the Soviet paradigm of economic planning.¹⁵

Conclusions

¹² <http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2003&leaf=11&filename=6474&filetype=html>

¹³ EPW 'Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism? Demolishing a Myth' by M V Nadkarni, November 8, 2003 p 458

¹⁴ Walter Fernandes, "A Socio-historical perspective for Liberation Theology in India' in Felix Wilfred (ed.), *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992.

¹⁵ The Caste System and the Stages of Life in Hinduism <http://www.friesian.com/caste.htm>

Traditionally, caste and village called out to each other in synergy. If the village was said to be tranquil it was argued that caste ideology was responsible for it. This is how the much vaunted Jajmani system was understood. Each caste had its specific locus and all castes agreed in the hierarchy of purity where the Brahman sat on top. What most scholars failed to notice was that the hierarchy on the ground was not an outcome of ideological acquiescence but an outcome of an unequal distribution of wealth and power in a closed agrarian economy. In fact, every caste values itself and its ritual practices very highly, and no caste actually believes that it is essentially impure. Origin myths of castes clearly demonstrate this. In every instance, these origin tales recall a mythic past when a supposedly 'low caste' actually held a very high status in the distant past. Loss of status took place in such cases because of chicanery, deceit, reversals in war, and sometimes also because the gods were idiosyncratic. But on no account did the members of the so-called lower caste participate willingly in their own subjugation. Nor is it that ideas of grandeur crop up once a caste has economic and political power. In fact, these ideas are always there, except that they cannot be extraverted when conditions are not propitious as in a closed village economy under the sway of a dominant caste. As this aspect of unconditional dominance is rapidly becoming a thing of the past in Indian villages, the assertion of caste identities is becoming much more strident and out in the open. This is also why caste politics has so much purchase in contemporary India [see Gupta 2000; for details]. Even if the perfectly orchestrated organic division of labour based on caste did not quite exist, nevertheless, M N Srinivas argued, "the power wielded by the dominant caste was real" [Srinivas 1987:59]. Members of the dominant caste were the chief patrons of the village [see Beteille 1980: 110-115], though, they had to encounter factional rivalries within [see Dumont 1970: 163-64]. What remained largely undisputed was that everyday life, politics, economics and rituals included, pivoted around the dispensations of the dominant caste. Social anthropology was clearly cured of any romantic naiveté primarily because leaders in the field insisted on the field view and not the book view. The fact that the village community, howsoever defined, did not mean egalitarianism comes through quite clearly in the works of several scholars, foremost among them is perhaps M N Srinivas. Even so, the concept of the dominant caste does not illumine village India today like it used to a few decades ago. Bose (1991), Bandopadhyaya and von Eschen (1991), Harriss (1982), Sahay (2001), Chakravarti (2001) and a host of other authors discussed tensions between agrarian classes, bringing out the severe asymmetry of rural social relations.

A combination of wholly new technologies, institutions based on new principles and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation for a considerable time to uproot the caste system. Such a combination of forces is today bringing about the destruction of the caste-based system of production in the villages and at the local level. Caste-wise division of labour is fast breaking down all over rural India, and is likely to disappear in the near future. This event is of momentous importance for it augurs the end of a social order which has continued for 2,000 years or more.

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