SOME REFLECTIONS ON CASTE
EVOLUTION AND CONTINUANCE

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ABSTRACT

Caste has formed an integral part of the South Asian identity, sometimes even superseding religious affiliations and ideologies. The pervasive and ubiquitous nature of caste and its persistence has stimulated theoretical debates and speculations about its origin and its role in Indian society. This paper reflects on some of theories, historical and anthropological about the origins of caste and its role as an organizing principle of society in this region. It tries to highlight some of the key aspects of caste, the nature of Varna and Jati and the contribution of these to building up of community and social life.
Keywords: Caste, Varna, Jati, Religion, Race, Endogamy

Introduction

The institution of caste has remained an enigmatic aspect of Indian society as many decades of social reform and legislation have not succeeded in eroding the role that caste plays in the Indian society. As the example of the Christians and Muslims in India indicate, even religious conversion has not succeeded in eroding caste values but on the contrary have made them integral aspects of those religions which have no place for them in their doctrines. Even political ideologies like that of communism have not been able to rid the inbuilt caste prejudices from the minds of people as illustrated beautifully by Arundhati Roy in her book, *God of Small Things*. In this paper we examine some theories of the origin of caste in India and its amalgamation with the Indian identity. A point of view can be thus put forward that caste values have been ingrained into the very fabric of society in South Asia from the very inception and some specific historical accidents have gone into the formation of a unique system of codification of identity that sets this region apart from the world. This is not to say that caste as a system of discrimination and inequality does not find parallels with other similar systems, most notably, race (Channa, 2005, 2013) but in terms of ascription of personhood and a total system of bestowing identity and reproduction of social categories, it combines a set of propositions that are its very own. Thus differences are rooted in philosophical speculations about the nature of embodiment, about the phenomenological and the numinous and not merely in concepts of power

and hierarchy. The world of the sacred is not monopolized but distributed among the various segments irrespective of their hierarchy including the very lowest and despicable; like for example the Doms of the cremation ground.

Historical evidences and speculations

Smith (1994:3) attributes the basis of having the four fold typology of Varna, which is the core of the caste system, as stemming from a need for classification that is inherent in all human thought, "it is the very condition of possibility. To know about something is to know how to categorize it." It is often speculated that this form of classification existed in the pre-Vedic societies even before they came to India. A fourfold classification is also not unique to India, in Tibet also it exists as described by Nimri (1978:52) as: *nag-pa* (priest), *ger-pa* (noble), *mi-ser* (commoner) and *ya-wa* (outcaste) and "As endogamous units combined into a system, these seem to approximate the Hindu Varna model of society with its fundamental division into four ranks" (ibid). However while the four fold system is common to both, the elaborate concepts of purity and pollution as found in the Hindu system are absent and so are the *jatis,* the real operational units of the caste system. In general, even in the feudal order, a priestly class, a ruling class, a category of commoners and one of serfs was not uncommon in many parts of the world. The uniqueness of caste lies in the complex set of relationships and norms (of purity and pollution) and different manner of constructing personhood.

In the Hindu cosmology attributed to the Vedas, the word Varna is synonymous with the concept of 'colour' and also 'quality'; and recognizes three kinds of qualities to be co-existent in this world, namely *satvic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic*; associated with the colours white, red/yellow and black. These also refer to different qualities in human and other beings; *satvic* referring to the *suddha* (pure), spiritual and intellectual properties, *rajasic* to valor, strength and warring and *tamasic* to the material, sensual and worldly things. The Purusa myth of the Rgveda, describes the sacrifice of the primal being Purusa (R.V.10, 90; c.f. Bodewitz, 1992: 51) and his dissolution into the four major kinds of beings, Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudra; from his head, arms, thighs and feet respectively. However as pointed out by Ghurye (1969), the term Varna was not used in the Rgveda to refer to these categories, this classification comes later in the Satpatha Brahmana, where according to the sage Patanjali (in 150 B.C) "the Brahmin was fair skinned with tawny hair and the skin colour of the non-Brahmin was black"(ibid,173) . Thus on the basis of evidence that exists from the Rg Veda, actual colour to designate Varna, was never implied till maybe quite a late period.

An eminent scholar of the caste system, Hocart (1950: 27), adds that this four- fold division was incorporated even in the planning of the cities and that Varna was not about colour but symbolic of the four cardinal points. "The four groups are placed at different points of the compass, within the square or circular city- royal to the east, mercantile to the south, servile to the west, priestly to the north. Heretics and outcastes live outside the city near the cremation ground". These placements indicate the ritual superiority of the priests as the North direction has been the superior direction in ancient India and the superior position of the Brahmana who carried out the Vedic sacrifices seems to have begun the process of hierachization in ancient times. In the present day too, the in the lay out of the caste villages a similar plan is followed where the upper castes are placed towards the superior direction, either 'north' or up, and the outcastes are placed outside the main boundaries of the village. For example in a village that I visited near Hrishikesh in Uttarakhand, I found that the Brahmins were on the higher slopes of the inclined village (being a hilly area) and the middle level castes who were the primary cultivators and land owners near the centre of the village and also favourably placed with respect to the sources of water. The untouchables were outside the village across a road that separated their habitation from the main village. In the older orthogenetic cities like Old Delhi, Lucknow and Benaras, similar divisions were made within the city itself with areas demarcated for different castes.

However Hocart was also of the opinion that the Varna system was a flexible system based on actual capabilities of persons rather than their birth, at least in its initial phase of inception. It is interesting to quote Hocart who says that the Puranas tell that, some sons of Manu became Kshatriyas and some Shudras (like Ishvaku), "You will not persuade people that three castes are descended from three brothers, unless it is considered within the bounds of possibility"(ibid, 52). "The term jati, which we have unfortunately rendered 'caste', is very elastic, as we saw, and may mean any sort of common descent". (ibid, 59).

The theory of the four fold Varna divisions has also been incorporated into the racial theory of caste to say that the higher categories of the Brahmanas and Ksatriyas came from a conquering white race, called Aryan, who also composed the verses of the Vedas, and the lower castes were an indigenous and defeated (therefore subordinated) dark race. Many people including the early British administrators supported such a theory and administrators cum anthropologist like Risley (1908) substantiated it through anthropological measurements. Trautmann (2004/1997), among others, completely demolished the Aryan theory to show conclusively that "the Vedic evidence

that has been brought forward has been subjected to a consistent overreading in favor of racialized interpretations, and that the image of the 'dark-skinned' savage is only imposed on the Vedic evidence with a considerable amount of 'text-torturing', both substantive and 'adjectival' in character." (ibid, 208). The originator of this term, Max Muller also distanced himself from the racial connotation, saying that Aryan was only a linguistic category of a people speaking certain kinds of Indo-European languages having nothing to with any biological characters.

Even more incisive are Ambedkar's (1946) reflections on the early origins of the Varna and jati classifications. Like many others he was completely opposed to the theory of a superior and white Aryan race, calling it a fiction to legalize the hierarchy of the caste system. He also believed in the fluidity of the system from ancient times, quoting "Rig Veda x.49.3 (says Indra) 'I have deprived the Dasyus of the title of Aryas'" (ibid, 72) which indicates that these were not mutually exclusive categories based on race but on status and power and war and conquest could move one group, either up or down from one category to another. He is also of the opinion that there were two groups of Aryans- The Rigveda belonged to one group and the Atharva Veda to the other, there are likewise two stories of origin of the Varnas. The Purusha theory which is supernatural and the origin of the Varnas from the various sons of Manu (see also Hocart, 1950: 52), which is a natural theory (Ambedkar, 1946: 76).

Apart from the textual misinterpretations there was material evidence to oppose the 'conquest' theory and this was in view of the superiority of the pre-Aryan civilization that existed in this region, namely the highly developed Harrapan cities and the rather thin possibility of them having been conquered by an invading horde of pastoral nomads. For whoever the people who entered into the Indian subcontinent from the North-West may have been, they were certainly mounted, being able to travel long distances and would have been pastorals rather than agriculturalists as the latter are not known to have been prehistoric travelers. The known civilizations of the world at this time were all settled on river valleys and while long distance trade flourished, they have not been travelling to colonize distant lands, a characteristic predominantly of pastoral nomads only. There is certainly historical evidence of the Harappan civilization having disappeared but the exact cause has not been fully agreed upon although the conquest theory has largely been replaced by an ecological one (flood or famine) like that of the Mesopotamian civilization.

At the same time there is also enough evidence of migration into the Indian subcontinent of people from the North West side to indicate that some

mixing of populations must have taken place. Miller and Miller (1970: 272) confirm that there are archaeological and skeletal evidences of mixing of cultures and people; "two different tool traditions were discovered, the Euro-African tool types of 'paleolithic' varieties and tool types generally considered to be South-East Asian in origin... Skeletal remains suggest a considerably mixed population at a period between 3,000 and 1,500 B.C." Wolpert also points to a migration around 2000 B.C when "the original Indo –European speaking semi-nomadic barbarians, who most probably lived in the region between the Caspian and Black seas, were driven from their land by some natural disaster" (1997:22).

However, the proponents of the Vedas (whosoever they were), for all the richness of their verses had no script and no cities of settlements. In fact Wolpert (ibid, 25) has also raised doubt about the Aryan conquest theory saying that in comparison to the fortified and well developed cities of MohenjaDaro and Harrapa, the Aryans did not have the technological[1] or military capability of storming the cities. Doubts are also cast on the veracity of this term where Aryan seems to have been a linguist rather than a racial category. As Wolpert (ibid) puts it, Arya was a person of high rank and the common category of the Aryans was referred to as Vis, and was probably the ancestor of the later Vaisyas. In other words Aryan is not someone with distinct racial characters but anyone who is culturally and politically superior.This is a reflection similar to that of Ambedkar who also thinks that these divisions were political and flexible. Trautmann too says, "...darkness of skin was not a salient marker of *Dasyu/dasa* identity to the hymn writer (of the Rig Veda), for whom the most important attributes of their enemies had rather to do with language and religion" (1997:208) (see also Ketkar, 1909: 79)[2]. But still some eminent scholars like Habib (2007/1995) are of the opinion that since the Harappan civilization was not simply its cities but also a large peasantry (required to support the cities), the flood or disaster theory is not tenable as it is not possible that the entire agricultural communities were submerged. Therefore he is still supportive of the invasion and conquest theory by some outside people who too were not completely without stratification and some degree of accomplishments. "The success of the Aryans is ascribed to the possession of the horse, and, still more, the horse drawn chariot. Since, compared with all the previous armour and weaponry, the chariot was immensely expensive machine, its possession implied a pre-existing aristocracy; it is therefore difficult to envision an early egalitarian stage within Rigvedic society, as has sometime been suggested" (Habib, 2007/1995: 114). In other words Habib is also suggesting that the invaders came with their own system of hierarchical classification which is also a plausible theory and

some are of the opinion that the four fold division may have occurred as a grafting of two systems, one indigenous and the other incoming. Thus referring to the two distinct kinds of groupings of Varna and jati, Thapar (2002: 63) speculates that they could also have been two distinct systems and the integration of the two could have been a historical process.

In fact the Rg Vedic sources refer more to a fluid society where power struggles were taking place than a system of rigid classifications. It is more of a society in the making than one with everything already in place. While some scholars have supported a theory of amalgamation of the fertility cults and matricentric rituals (as evidenced from the finding of mother goddess figurines) of Harrappan civilization with the patrilineal and male centric gods of the incoming pastoral people, to create the hybrid jati systems; Jaiswal (1998:160) cites basic dissent of the Siva and Sakti worshippers to the caste system[3] to support her contention that the hierarchy of the Varna could not be an outcome of synthesis but is more likely a result of internal evolution of the Rg Vedic society.

Most historians such as Altekar (1958), R.S Sharma (1977) and Jaiswal (1998) are of the considered opinion that while the pastoral people who authored the Vedas were ranked, they did not have a full-fledged class system that later supported the relatively more rigid and institutionalized organization today recognized as caste society. According to Jaiswal, such a society may have emerged only when the class of rulers appeared along with the supportive priestly class and R.S.Sharma puts the dates as the system emerging around AD fifth and reaching its climax in the twelfth century. Altekar (1958:226) writes that "The Satapatha Brahmana (X.4.1.10) describes how some of the sons of Shyaparòa Sayakayana became Brahmanas, Some Ksatriyas and some Vaisyas. Some of the authors of Vedic hymns were Ksatriyas." Similarly Viswamitra who was born a Ksatriya became a Brahmin and a sage. He (ibid) also mentions that Rg Vedic society did not encourage heredity, and although classes were present, the caste system is unlikely to have materialized. As Pandian points out 'in the epic Mahabharata, Krishna states: "*Chaturvarniyammayasrataguna karma vibaghasa* (The four aspects of humanity are manifested in terms of quality and action)' (1995:109); this according to Pandian would mean that the loss or gain of a quality would bring about a change in one's Varna.

As cited by scholars such as Dandekar (1992), the Rig Veda[4] mostly concentrates upon the power struggle between the two highest groups, namely the Brahmins and the Ksatriyas, more so as most of the verses were composed by the Brahmins who also had control over the magical worlds of the *mantras*. Dandekar (ibid) is of the opinion that the Rg Vedic mythologies were not static but were responding to the historical transformations the society of the

composers were undergoing. The various gods were gaining importance and also changing their characters as the society moved and transformed; which included the fusion of two gods into one to prevent break up of communities following these separate gods, example Mitravarunau and what Dandekar considers even more significant, the emergence of Indravarunau; fusion of Indra the war lord with Varuna the god that imposed order. As the proto Aryas moved from Balk towards the land of the seven rivers, they had to adapt to a war like life situation confronting many obstacles and the cosmic cult of AsuraVaruna was replaced by that of Indra, the warrior who became the supreme god in this period of migration and resettlement. "The socio-religious repercussions of the newly evident domineering stance of the cult of militarism against priest craft- of *ksatra* against brahman- are seen to have been reflected in several Vedic passages" (ibid, 69-70)[55]. In their struggle for power with the dominant Ksatriyas, the composers of the Vedic verses had to insist that, "in order to prove efficacious, the military prowess (as symbolised by Indra) had to be supplemented by the magically potent *mantra*." (ibid). Thus Brhaspati, the lord of Brahmins, emerges as a new god, a Brahmin, he is the creator of all *mantras* without whose help no action of the king can be successful. At the same time a string of stringent laws appear to protect the Brahmin and his wife.

Thus it is to be clearly understood that there was dynamism and power struggle between the various categories, especially those at the top, during the early phase of evolution of the Vedic civilization. The adaptive nature of the classificatory system to the historical and environmental conditions (as for example when the pastoral nomads adapted to a sedentary lifestyle and agriculture and the state made its appearance) makes it clear that at least in the early phases of its development, Varna hierarchy was not rigid but a dynamic variable with negotiable power equations.

There have been several ways in which the origin of the hierarchy in early Indian society has been conceptualized; one as already discussed was the racial theory. Thapar (1992: 30) also outlines several other theories in addition to the conquest and political formation theory; the professional or occupational group formation as given by Max Muller and one based on religious sectarianism given by Alfred Lyall, according to which religious sects could also have evolved into castes. She also refers to Senart's view that the laws of commensality point towards the exclusion of the 'outsiders' so that caste could have originated from an extension of the concept of family and internal equality (Ibid). All these theories were not just directed towards explaining the four fold hierarchy but also the formation of numerous jatis

with their different cultures and even rituals and which were in addition endogamous.

Characters and attributes of Varna/Jati

At the level of day to day life the caste system is not just a philosophy in abstraction but comprises codes of action that most importantly is integrated with the kinship organization of Indian society and also dictates more mundane activities like occupation and class. The Varna divisions make a separation between those who are recognized as Twice –Born, among whom the men are given a sacred thread to indicate that they are of high Varna status eligible to be served by the Brahmin and those who are not so privileged. Usually it is the three upper Varna, to the exclusion of the Sudra thus recognized as 'caste Hindus' (a term much used in contemporary social studies). The ones who are deprived of the sacred thread, the Sudra and the untouchables cannot be served ritually by the Brahmin and have to perform their life cycle rituals such as marriage and death rituals without access to sacred Hindu *mantras*.

At the operational level the Varna dissolve into numerous 'jatis'; actual groups of identity that divides all Hindus into territorial and largely intermarrying groups, that are locally ranked and to which the Varna categories only provide a generalized schema of classification. Thus when we are talking of rank, there is a broad four fold division of Varna and then these innumerable local 'jatis' whose ranks are usually only broadly categorized, leaving plenty of scope for movement and contestation; the dynamics of which have stimulated numerous ethnographic and anthropological studies of specific historically situated instances. The term Jati, that is etymologically quite different from Varna is a polysemic word that may mean many things. When one talks of *manusya* (human) jati one is referring to a species, similarly all birds animals etc are jatis, then when one is taking about being a *nari* or *purusa* jati, then one is referring to gender, female or male, then also one may belong to the jati of the white people or the jati of someone of a different social grouping and so on. It is thus a way of identifying as to who is similar to one's self and who is different but it has positive referents in terms of the specific and known characters of different jatis, human or non-human. Jati can also be used as synonymous with Varna so that it is perfectly feasible to say one is of the Brahman jati or Sudrajati.

Thus while in philosophical terms the Varna categorization provides a kind of timeless ideology; the interrelationship of 'jatis' provides a ground level situation that is embedded in political, historical and economic factors and has been one of the most debated and studied dimension of Indian society. As Pandian points out (1995: 68) "We must keep in mind the fact that the

religious principles of endogamy, rank, heredity, and occupation which are identified as the distinguishing characteristics of the caste system do not constitute a coherent model for the users of the system. People use the principles selectively and in multiple combinations. Ranking of groups is always in relation to other groups, and groups move up and down in terms of their economic and political power which is represented in religious or ritual terms". Perhaps it is this potentiality for interpretation and reinterpretation and its flexibility rather than its rigidity that has contributed to the persistence of the caste system.

The occupational diversity of the various 'jatis' and their localized character indicates as believed by Iravati Karve and also pre-historians like D.D. Kosambi that local artisan groups and people of diverse ethnic origins and customs became gradually incorporated into this system as the kings expanded their kingdoms and brought every one under their common rule. Thapar (2002:63-4) speculates that the jatis may have been the original clans that became caste later. The similarities between clan and jati are in terms of membership by birth and conferring of status through ascriptive membership, the separation of identities and regulation of marriages as members of a group, rather than as individuals. The difference lies in that the occupational specialization of jatis is not found in clans.It is likely that some clans took to occupational specialization as the economy evolved to encompass a wider range of occupations. However all these remain speculative theories only. The Manusmriti attributes the proliferation of Varna into jati through mixed unions providing another point of view (Tambiah, 1973a).

Conclusion

What is important to note even at the outset is that Varna and jati comprise one of the most basic and integral aspect of identity and personhood in South Asia even as of today. What contributes to the resilience of the caste system? Why is it still an integral part of the identity of most Indians (even non-Hindus)? The answer probably lies in that it is firstly integrally tied up with some of our most basic perspectives on cosmology and secondly it is a multifaceted system that touches upon some of the most vital aspects of life, like family, marriage, occupation and access to social resources. Rao (2003:5) writes quite significantly "Caste can be understood as a form of embodiment, i.e. as the means through which the body as a form of 'bare life' or mere biological surface is rendered expressive and meaningful"; to the extent that most Indians cannot even imagine thinking about being a person without a 'jati'. In present times when many aspects of jati have lost their significance, these identities still remain meaningful. Even as societies are getting more and

more class based, a jati serves to identify the core of being of a person; more in answer to the question, "Who am I?" Just like gender is one form of such essentialized identity, so is one's jati or 'jaat' from the point of view of most born on the soil of the subcontinent.

Thus the historical analysis points to the caste system as originating and evolving as the society evolved in India under the specific conditions of migration and conquests. Somewhere down the line it enabled the various groups to create an identity for themselves both as positive identities and as relational ones to enable them to negotiate with each other. Certainly there was also an established hierarchy and as a result of which some groups suffered indignities and marginalization. But even for these groups the sense of belongingness and identity that enabled them to form support networks and also a degree of subsistence security was an incentive not to discard the caste identities. My work on the washermen (Dhobis) shows the key role played by the 'biradari'; the endogamous group, a sub-division of the larger category, Dhobi; that is local and closely tied to each other by ties of kinship and marriage. Thus even those at the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy rarely wish to disown their caste name. Thus as Srinivas has also shown, the mobility that is wished for in the caste system, is that of the group and not only of the individual. Processes such as Sanskritization and Hinduization etc, pertain to the entire Jati. This is more so when the people are marginal, and need the support of their jati members. As shown in Channa (1985), there are many ways in which the community based on Jati supports its members. Thus the caste identity is an important resource in many situations and one that may not be given up easily. In fact even under the influence of modernization it is only a few persons usually ones that have security and privilege, that tend to disown their caste identities; while for a majority it remains a way to find their way around the social milieu.

NOTES

[1] The Aryans, " baked no bricks, built no elaborate baths or sewer systems, created no magnificent statues, or even modest figurines, they had no seals or writing, no faience art, no splendid homes" (Wolpert 1997: 25)

[2] "For centuries, till the arrival of the European scholars on Indian soil, the people of India never meant by the term 'Arya', that race of invaders who reduced the native of the soil to servitude" (Ketkar 1909:79)

[3] The myth of Siva, not being an invitee to the Yagna performed by King Daksha, his father-in-law; is one such instance. Also in Bengal and other places wherever there is organized worship of the Mother –Goddess, caste of the devotees is generally disregarded. In Bengal, in order accommodate

people of all jati description the worship of the Goddess Durga is annually carried out in the 'outside' of the house, in a place common to the entire village. It is referred to as *Baroyaripuja* (Community worship).

[4] According to Ghurye (1979), the compilation of the Rig Veda took place around 980 B.C and the hymns were composed between latter half of the fourteenth and the first half of the thirteenth century B.C. Ghurye, like R.P. Chanda and Ambedkar supports the two Aryan theory, that is the Aryans having come in two waves.

[5] This view of the Rig Vedic verses reflecting the power tussle of a society that was still moving has been supported by the research of other scholars like Kuiper (1960), Heesterman(1957) and Sparrelboom(1985)

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