

Brief Notes on Hinduism, Caste and Hierarchy

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, that believes in many gods. Life is seen as an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth, termed reincarnation and transmigration. Eventually, one is able to break out of this cycle and achieve *moksha*, unity with the universal oneness. Where one's soul is situated in this cycle is dependent upon one's *karma*, a sort of balance sheet of the good and bad deeds one's soul has ever committed. When a soul is reborn, it is born into the family, clan (*biradari*), sub-caste (*jati*) and caste (*jat*) in which that soul was meant to be born, and must now fulfill its *dharma*, ritual obligations unique to the position it is born into. For example, if one is born into a warrior caste, then that individual should strive to be the greatest prince or princess ever; if one is born into a pot-making caste, then that individual should strive to be the greatest potter ever.

Some scholars have argued that *karma* and *dharma* are anti-materialistic, and that these concepts favor fatalism, resignation, other-worldliness and asceticism. Alternatively, the *Bhagavad Gita* (a section of the *Mahabharata* meaning *Song of God*) emphasizes living a life of action without attachments. Therefore, *dharma* can also be understood to support the concept of success: both *karma* and *dharma* can be understood as supporting materialistic-oriented actions.

In Hinduism, the principal attribute of the gods is *shakti* (power). Sacrifices are offered to many gods, usually specific to an area. Gradually, this is transposed into seeing a trilogy of powerful gods which we can refer to as the Sanskritic or Great Tradition: Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Sustainer), and Shiva (the Destroyer).

We simultaneously see a concentration of power into the hands of a few important dynasties in India: the Mauryan dynasty of King Ashoka (about 250 B.C., who established a model of the "Great Empire" for India, and whose symbol, the wheel, is now on the national flag of India), then the Gupta dynasty (200-400 A.D.), and finally that of the Emperor Harsha. Initially, there had been no concentration of power: as there had been a pantheon of thousands of gods, so too there had been a virtual pantheon of petty rulers. As power is concentrated, we see some gods becoming more popular in public thought than others.

Hindu society was one of the first civilizations to make a distinction between religious authority and temporal power: 'this-worldly power'. From this distinction, what evolved in India is a highly articulate stratification system based on hierarchy, which is legitimated by religious belief, called the *jajmani* (caste) system

Hindu social structure and kinship patterns, derived from the *jajmani* system, are so pervasive that they strongly affect all social groups in India, not just Hindus. The resultant hierarchical orientation manifests in all social encounters. For example, there are no peer relationships in a family; genealogical age (not chronological) often determines formal behavior, which manifests through the common usage of denotative kinship terms.

Even the way a Hindu is supposed to live an ideal life is based on stratification: first one is a student, then a householder, then a hermit, and finally a wandering ascetic who has renounced the world. This, of course, is for men: the purpose of women is to be virtuous and to serve men, according to the *Laws of Manu*. Prior to their codification, however, pre-Aryan indigenous culture enjoyed far more egalitarian gender relations.

Caste and the Jajmani System

The *jajmani* system is a social contract system of reciprocal relations. In this group-based society (*not* individual-based), discipline is imposed by sanctions outside of the family as well as legitimated by them. Most actions of an individual are conducted in relation to various groups to which that person belongs, and are mediated by the groups as well. Membership in most groups is ascriptive, assigned by virtue of birth (as opposed to being based on achievement, something an individual does or obtains).

Main characteristics of the jajmani system:

1. **dependent on face-to-face interactions:** reciprocity is important in this. In the village, everyone knows one another's caste and place/position.
2. **hierarchically ranked accorded to purity/ pollution continuum.** Caste itself is not the only means of expression of hierarchical ideas; this also manifested in land ownership, power, etc.
3. based on **ascribed** (not achieved) **status**
4. **endogamy** : marriage within a group is not only strongly preferred, but is a critical component of social life which provides social cement for the larger community.
5. **commensality:** the notion that one eats freely only with other members of one's own group. Acceptors of cooked food are lower in status than the givers. These notions of hierarchy, in effect, penetrate every level of social life.
6. **occupational specialization**

Levels in the jajmani system:

Family/close kin: in north India, hierarchy is ranked by one's relationship to one's father (as it is a patriarchal, patrilineal system); in the south, elements of a matrilineal system remain in places, so the basis of ranking within the family may be a bit different. When a marriage occurs, the boy's family, which takes in his wife at the time of marriage (i.e., one gives a daughter 'away' in marriage) establishes a higher status than the family that gives their daughter away in marriage. Families are considered to be an extended family when they share a common stove.

Biradari: kinship group, lineage, clan: descent from one common ancestor. Too close for Hindus to marry within, though Muslims prefer to do so.

Jati: local sub-caste unit in which one should marry; this is a tight network of small groups on the village level which may extend to neighboring villages. On a practical level, this is the arena in which most caste interactions occur, though what we have come to term as caste is actually *jat*. There are hundreds of *jats* in India; there are thousands of *jatis* in India.

Jat: the larger "caste" group, which defines where one stands vis a vis level of purity,

occupational specialization, and the like. This is the largest group into which a Hindu may marry, and one is not expected to know everyone in one's *jat*.

Varna: the larger grouping of four (actually, five, when include Untouchables, who are actually left out of the list) groups in which every *jat* can be placed: *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras*. The first three groups consist of twice-born souls.

Notes on hierarchical orientation of Indian society

Relations between villagers revolves around caste, kinship, and status concerns. Some sort of hierarchical orientation manifests in all social encounters. An example of this is the common usage of denotative kinship terms, used for biological and fictive kin alike. (Example, note the use of *chacha* – father's brother -- often used.) There are no peer relationships in a family. Denotative kinship terminology is crucial, causing genealogical age (not chronological age) to determine formal behavior. Even bodily parts are valued in an hierarchical order: the head at the top, the feet at the bottom (hence it is insulting to point the bottom of one's feet at someone in Indian culture).

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