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Verdict from Belgium

Last month, two ardent Hindus battled out the controversial pros and cons of caste. This month's assessment, from Europe, focuses on history and how jati and varna have, for the most part, helped rather than hurt Hinduism.

By Prof. Koenraad Elst

In an inter-faith debate, most Hindus can easily be put on the defensive with a single word-caste. Any anti-Hindu polemist can be counted on to allege that "the typically Hindu caste system is the most cruel apartheid, imposed by the barbaric white Aryan invaders on the gentle dark-skinned natives." Here's a more balanced and historical account of this controversial institution.

Merits of the Caste System

The caste system is often portrayed as the ultimate horror. Inborn inequality is indeed unacceptable to us moderns, but this does not preclude that the system has also had its merits.

Caste is perceived as an "exclusion-from," but first of all it is a form of "belonging-to," a natural structure of solidarity. For this reason, Christian and Muslim missionaries found it very difficult to lure Hindus away from their communities. Sometimes castes were collectively converted to Islam, and Pope Gregory XV (1621-23) decreed that the missionaries could tolerate caste distinction

among Christian converts; but by and large, caste remained an effective hurdle to the destruction of Hinduism through conversion. That is why the missionaries started attacking the institution of caste and in particular the brahmin caste. This propaganda has bloomed into a full-fledged anti-brahminism, the Indian equivalent of anti-Semitism.

Every caste had a large measure of autonomy, with its own judiciary, duties and privileges, and often its own temples. Inter-caste affairs were settled at the village council by consensus; even the lowest caste had veto power. This autonomy of intermediate levels of society is the antithesis of the totalitarian society in which the individual stands helpless before the all-powerful state. This decentralized structure of civil society and of the Hindu religious commonwealth has been crucial to the survival of Hinduism under Muslim rule. Whereas Buddhism was swept away as soon as its monasteries were destroyed, Hinduism retreated into its caste structure and weathered the storm.

Caste also provided a framework for integrating immigrant communities: Jews, Zoroastrians and Syrian Christians. They were not only tolerated, but assisted in efforts to preserve their distinctive traditions.

Typically Hindu?

It is routinely claimed that caste is a uniquely Hindu institution. Yet, counter examples are not hard to come by. In Europe and elsewhere, there was (or still is) a hierarchical distinction between noblemen and commoners, with nobility only marrying nobility. Many tribal societies punished the breach of endogamy rules with death.

Coming to the Indian tribes, we find Christian missionaries claiming that "tribals are not Hindus because they do not observe caste." In reality, missionary literature itself is rife with testimonies of caste practices among tribals. A spectacular example is what the missions call "the Mistake:" the attempt, in 1891, to make tribal converts in Chhotanagpur inter-dine with converts from other tribes. It was a disaster for the mission. Most tribals renounced Christianity because they chose to preserve the taboo on inter-dining. As strongly as the haughtiest brahmin, they refused to mix what God hath separated.

Endogamy and exogamy are observed by tribal societies the world over. The question is therefore not why Hindu society invented this system, but how it could preserve these tribal identities even after outgrowing the tribal stage of civilization. The answer lies largely in the expanding Vedic culture's intrinsically respectful and conservative spirit, which ensured that each tribe could preserve its customs and traditions, including its defining custom of tribal endogamy.

Description and History

The Portuguese colonizers applied the term caste, "lineage, breed," to two different Hindu institutions: jati and varna. The effective unit of the caste system is the jati, birth-unit, an endogamous group into which you are born, and within which you marry. In principle, you can only dine with fellow members, but the pressures of modern life have eroded this rule. The several thousands of jatis are subdivided in exogamous clans, gotra. This double division dates back to tribal society.

By contrast, varna is the typical functional division of an advanced society-the Indus/Saraswati civilization, 3rd millennium, bce. The youngest part of the Rg-Veda describes four classes: learned brahmins born from Brahma's mouth, martial kshatriya-born from his arms; vaishya entrepreneurs born from His hips and shudra workers born from His feet. Everyone is a shudra by birth. Boys become dwija, twice-born, or member of one of the three upper varnas upon receiving the sacred thread in the upanayana ceremony.

The varna system expanded from the Saraswati-Yamuna area and got firmly established in the whole of Aryavarta (Kashmir to Vidarbha, Sindh to Bihar). It counted as a sign of superior culture setting the arya, civilized, heartland apart from the surrounding mlechha, barbaric, lands. In Bengal and the South, the system was reduced to a distinction between brahmins and shudras. Varna is a ritual category and does not fully correspond to effective social or economic status. Thus, half of the princely rulers in British India were shudras and a few were brahmins, though it is the kshatriya function par excellence. Many shudras are rich, many brahmins impoverished.

The Mahabharata defines the varna qualities thus: "He in whom you find truthfulness, generosity, absence of hatred, modesty, goodness and self-restraint, is

a brahmana. He who fulfills the duties of a knight, studies the scriptures, concentrates on acquisition and distribution of riches, is a kshatriya. He who loves cattle-breeding, agriculture and money, is honest and well-versed in scripture, is a vaishya. He who eats anything, practises any profession, ignores purity rules, and takes no interest in scriptures and rules of life, is a shudra." The higher the varna, the more rules of self-discipline are to be observed. Hence, a jati could collectively improve its status by adopting more demanding rules of conduct, e.g. vegetarianism.

A person's second name usually indicates his jati or gotra. Further, one can use the following varna titles: Sharma (shelter, or joy) indicates the brahmin, Varma (armour) the kshatriya, Gupta (protected) the vaishya and Das (servant) the shudra. In a single family, one person may call himself Gupta (varna), another Agrawal (jati), yet another Garg (gotra). A monk, upon renouncing the world, sheds his name along with his caste identity.

Untouchability

Below the caste hierarchy are the untouchables, or harijan (literally "God's people"), dalits ("oppressed"), paraiah (one such caste in South India), or scheduled castes. They make up about 16% of the Indian population, as many as the upper castes combined.

Untouchability originates in the belief that evil spirits surround dead and dying substances. People who work with corpses, body excretions or animal skins had an aura of danger and impurity, so they were kept away from mainstream society and from sacred learning and ritual. This often took grotesque forms: thus, an untouchable had to announce his polluting proximity with a rattle, like a leper.

Untouchability is unknown in the Vedas, and therefore repudiated by neo-Vedic reformers like Dayanand Saraswati, Narayan Guru, Gandhiji and Savarkar. In 1967, Dr. Ambedkar, a dalit by birth and fierce critic of social injustice in Hinduism and Islam, led a mass conversion to Buddhism, partly on the (unhistorical) assumption that Buddhism had been an anti-caste movement. The 1950 constitution outlawed untouchability and sanctioned positive discrimination programs for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Lately, the Vishva Hindu Parishad has managed to get even the

most traditionalist religious leaders on the anti-untouchability platform, so that they invite harijans to Vedic schools and train them as priests. In the villages, however, pestering of dalits is still a regular phenomenon, occasioned less by ritual purity issues than by land and labor disputes. However, the dalits' increasing political clout is accelerating the elimination of untouchability.

Caste Conversion

In the Mahabharata, Yuddhishtira affirms that varna is defined by the qualities of head and heart, not by one's birth. Krishna teaches that varna is defined by one's activity (karma) and quality (guna). Till today, it is an unfinished debate to what extent one's "quality" is determined by heredity or by environmental influence. And so, while the hereditary view has been predominant for long, the non-hereditary conception of varna has always been around as well, as is clear from the practice of varna conversion. The most famous example is the 17th-century freedom fighter Shivaji, a shudra who was accorded kshatriya status to match his military achievements. The geographical spread of Vedic tradition was achieved through large-scale initiation of local elites into the varna order. From 1875 onwards, the Arya Samaj has systematically administered the "purification ritual" (shuddhi) to Muslim and Christian converts and to low-caste Hindus, making the dwija. Conversely, the present policy of positive discrimination has made upper-caste people seek acceptance into the favored Scheduled Castes.

Veer Savarkar, the ideologue of Hindu nationalism, advocated intermarriage to unify the Hindu nation even at the biological level. Most contemporary Hindus, though now generally opposed to caste inequality, continue to marry within their respective jati because they see no reason for their dissolution.

Racial Theory of Caste

Nineteenth-century Westerners projected the colonial situation and the newest race theories on the caste system: the upper castes were white invaders lording it over the black natives. This outdated view is still repeated ad-nauseam by anti-Hindu authors: now that "idolatry" has lost its force as a term of abuse, "racism" is a welcome innovation to demonize Hinduism. In reality, India is the region where all skin color types met and mingled, and you will find many brahmins

as black as Nelson Mandela. Ancient "Aryan" heroes like Rama, Krishna, Draupadi, Ravana (a brahmin) and a number of Vedic seers were explicitly described as being dark-skinned.

But doesn't varna mean "skin color?" The effective meaning of varna is "splendor, color," and hence "distinctive quality" or "one segment in a spectrum." The four functional classes constitute the "colors" in the spectrum of society. Symbolic colors are allotted to the varna on the basis of the cosmological scheme of "three qualities" (triguna): white is sattva (truthful), the quality typifying the brahmin; red is rajas (energetic), for the kshatriya; black is tamas (inert, solid), for the shudra; yellow is allotted to the vaishya, who is defined by a mixture of qualities.

Finally, caste society has been the most stable society in history. Indian communists used to sneer that "India has never even had a revolution." Actually, that is no mean achievement.

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