

Caste and *Jāti*

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Abstract: Traditional Indian social organization developed under very specific historical circumstances. The Brahmanic ideology of Dharma dominated the social and even economic life of the Hindus and created a system capable of maintaining stability through the unique structure of "caste order". However, caste as described in many Western scholarly publications bears only a faint resemblance to this institution of Hindu society.

Indian social structure is composed of a great diversity of elements with kinship categories being its essence. Specific characteristics of caste - such as endogamy, profession, a particular kind of religious worship and marriage rules - manifest themselves at the level of kin groups and *birādarīs*, of which the broadest and dominant of these being *jāti*. The institution of *jāti* is rooted in prehistoric tribal concepts and usages. In Hindu society, *jāti* acts as a real agent that manages all the tasks and aims inherent in, and regarded as important by, Hindu society. Thus, *jāti* is a basic "structural unit" of Hindu society.

A Hindu social ideal articulated in *dharmaśāstras* is fundamental for Indian culture and Indian civilization. The Brahmanic social ideology, or *caturvarṇāśramadharmā* (lit. "dharma of four *varṇas* and four stages of life"), underlies every traditional form of social, economic and religious life in India, even today, and its influence goes far beyond the limits of the four *varṇas* as it also affects the so called Untouchables and non-Hindu communities.

This ideology actually works as an ideology of a segmented cellular society, composed of kinship-based social bodies. It is a Brahmanic (more precisely, *śāstric*) concept of *jāti* ("kith and kin," lit. "birth, species") as an elementary social unit that shapes the very pattern of Hindu social structure and its character. In spite of this, even today studies of Indian society are dominated by a Western scholarly tradition with its own concept of caste, a concept that is unknown to Brahmanic thought.

Western theorizing on caste respects Brahmanical social tradition in a very superficial way. It follows such Brahmanic texts as the *Manavadharmaśāstra* in order to postulate the social category of *varṇa* (class) as the essence of Hindu social order. However, Brahmanical social tradition says that *varṇas* in reality are composed of a variety of *jātis* [*jāti*, singular; *jātis*, plural]. In many scholarly research works, the category of *jāti* is usually referred to by English words including "caste" and "subcaste," but these terms are inadequate and do not properly capture the meaning of *jāti*.

It should be acknowledged that the Indian traditional social structures of *jāti* and caste, as described in scholarly texts, do share common features. In-group marriage restriction (endogamy) and hereditary fixed occupation are the most important of them. Local segments of castes and *jātis* cooperate in economic matters and follow highly sophisticated rules of commensality. Caste-based social hierarchy ranges from the most impure Untouchables at the bottom to the most pure Brahmanas at the top. However, caste and *jāti* are not the same.

From the very beginning of Indian studies, Indologists emphasized the need for comprehensive knowledge about authentic social culture. Max Müller, who did not like the word "caste" and considered it an invention of "rough Portuguese sailors"¹ and inadequate for the task of describing Indian society, said: "What we really want to know is what was implied by such Indian words as Varna (color), Gāti (kith), to say nothing of Sapindatva or Samānodakatva, Kula (family), Gotra (race), Pravara (lineage); otherwise we shall have once more the same confusion about the social organisation of ancient India as about African fetishism or North American totemism!" (Müller 1919: 9). Methods of social anthropology are helpful when seeking the solution to this problem of expressing Hindu concepts, but the closed nature of Hindu society is a great impediment to doing this difficult research work. To find out the respective functional meaning of *caste* and *jāti*, two interrelated questions need to be answered:

1. Is there any correlation between kinship ties and caste identity?
- and
2. Can caste identity be explained by referring to the practice of endogamy?

The theory of caste was introduced for administrative purposes at the turn of the twentieth century by British ethnographers and colonial officials and was based on Indian census materials. The first Indian censuses and ethnographic studies produced huge amounts of detailed information about Indian society. These were published under the title of the "Tribes and Castes" for every region of India. Indian society was interpreted as a conglomeration of innumerable castes and tribes, arranged within a "caste system." H.H. Risley (1915) in his *The People of India*, gave a "racial" explanation to account for the the origin and the functioning of the caste system, while the "occupational" explanation was given by D.C.J. Ibbetson (1916), J.C. Nesfield (1885), W. Crooke (1896), and E.A.H. Blunt (1931). J. Hutton (1946), G.S. Ghurye (1969) and others contributed to this theory with their caste classifications and analysis of empirical information that was possible at that time. These achievements are now regarded as "Orientalism," and the publication of the *Castes of Mind* by N.B. Dirks (2004) was seen as being highly symbolic. This author presents an interesting interpretation of caste as an artificial mental construction of British scholarship created to meet the needs of colonial administration.

Over the course of time, new theories were put forward. The phenomenon of caste is now explained as an extreme form of social inequality, and this explanation is highly influential.² L. Dumont (1988) believed that caste was a religious holistic principle in action, and this theory has

¹ The term *caste* derives from the Portuguese word, *casta*, usually translated as "chaste" or "pure."

² For a detailed historiography of the subject see Jaival (2000).

been followed by ardent adherents of this theory as well as it being opposed by its severe critics. M. Milner (1994) established a tradition of explaining caste as the quintessence of social status. There exists an abundance of conflicting opinions on this matter and in most cases academic thought demonstrates a total eclecticism, with a confusion of Brahmanic and Western social terminologies and notions. As Milner (2002: 418) puts it:

‘Caste’ refers to a rigid system of ranked social inequality with significant barriers to mobility or to intimate associations between different strata. The word also refers to one of the ranked strata or subgroups that make up such a system. Traditional India is considered the classic example of a caste system.... Most *jātis* were associated with a particular traditional occupation or ritual activity, such as barber, drummer, cow herder, priest and so forth. These categories were ranked in a rough hierarchy based to a significant degree on their supposed ritual purity, with brahmans at the top and untouchables at the bottom. Ritual purity was partly an attribute of birth and partly due to the fastidiousness with which individuals and castes conformed to certain lifestyle norms... These *jāti* categories were divided into – or more accurately composed of – numerous regional subcastes, ranging from a few hundred families to tens of thousands. Subcastes were usually endogamous, composed of families who intermarried with one another and refused to marry others. Because of endogamy, many members of a subcaste were kin by birth or marriage. Most castes also practiced commensality: that is, they ate only with members of their own or a higher caste.

Since many influential specialists understand the insufficiency of the scholarly image of caste, gradual changes over time are noticeable in the approaches, assumptions and methods of studying Hindu social organization. Terms, concepts and even whole theories are being re-evaluated. An example is the growing recognition that the Indian term "*jāti*" is not equivalent to the European term "caste." But merely replacing one term with another term is not the solution to the problem. The only way to clarify the problem is to thoroughly study the cultural background of Hindu social traditions.

The Indian word *jāti* has been known to scholars since the first censuses of India. It is a well-known historical fact that during the 1891 Census just two castes, *Jat* and *Ahir*, named more than 1,780 of the *jātis* and this number was a great surprise to the census commissioners. Members of a *jāti* claimed that they are all relatives and intermarry in accordance with special rules. The Indian term *jāti* was accordingly translated into English as an "endogamous sub-caste," though close in meaning were translations of *jāti* such as *sept*, *clan*, *caste*, *race*, *tribe* and even *community* that occur in academic writings. Even today there exist hundreds of thousands of *jātis*, often territorial, and minor kin groups are registered as belonging to them. The names of *jātis* contain elaborate details indicating status differentiation (such as *mevafarosh khātik*; i.e., "butcher for a Muslim gardener" or *tilole kunbi*; i.e., "a person of Kunbi agricultural caste who cultivates sesame seeds").

Sanskrit words *varṇa* and *jāti* define inherited social categories differentiated by status of birth. *Varṇa* and *jāti* existed side by side at a very early stage. The Brahmanical view is that the *jātis* are the product of *varṇasamkara*; i.e., "illegal" cross-*varṇa* marriages, when *varṇas* multiplied into numerous *jātis* related to some *varṇa* or unrelated to any *varṇa*. Actually, the caste organization emerged as a method of ideologically (deliberately) restricted intercultural communication between the Aryan tribes and Indian autochthonous tribes – proto-Dravidian, proto-Munda and the others – during the period of first contact. The method was constituted and refined in the

dharmasāstra period as a principle of social life ("law") for Indo-Aryans surrounded by *anārya* ("non-Aryan") tribes. Anthropological research provides evidence that the structural composition of caste society is the result of the juxtaposition and the amalgamation of two social models developed by Vedic and pre-Aryan peoples respectively. The Vedic Aryans exercised the division of labour in the form of estates – *varṇas*. The social differentiation of pre-Aryan population was clan-based and had led to the formation of a segmented society. There already existed professionally specialized lineages of priestly elite, qualified ivory carvers, jewelers, makers of parasols, palm wine brewers, silk weavers and others. Kin-based *jātis* and *kulas* became "encapsulated" elementary cells of social structure as well as constituent elements of *varṇas*. It was from this remote tribal past that archaic social institutions, terminology and ideology of Hindu tradition evolved into the present castes.

In the Indian traditional social system, a *jāti* is the widest category of kinship. "In an extended kinship group all people can be shown to be related to one another either by affinal or by agnatic ties. Two people need not be related directly as agnates or as affines, but they may both be related to a third person with whom one is an agnate and the other is an affine." (Karve 1961: 17). A *jāti* is obtained by birth. It is an inherited identity in the social group of one's father (in some Dravidian matrilineal communities such as the Nayars a position in the mother's group is inherited). For a Hindu his or her *jāti* is the main social identity that determines his or her social status. *Jāti* identity between two persons means total equality in the status of those two persons; i.e., *birādarī* (lit. brotherhood) with those who belong to the same *jāti*, and sharing destiny with them. *Jāti* thus consists of a number of exogamous kin groups that are differently named in different regions and languages such as *kula/gotra*, *pangali*, *vakaiyāra* and so on. Born to a Hindu father, a person gets a Hindu identity and a *jāti* and *kula* identity as well. He or she inherits one's father's family background (genealogical network) and professional occupation. In addition, he or she also inherits one's type of religious worship and ritual practices and the special features of everyday life – one's father's diets, costume, etc., as these characteristics are the markers of *jāti* status. *Jāti* markers enable a Hindu to evaluate one's personal status, to compare it with that of other people, and to control one's conduct according to prescribed rules of commensality in order to keep one's ritual purity. Such a display of *jāti*-motivated behaviour is easily observed even by ignorant foreigners who then consider this kind of social communication and etiquette as being characteristic of caste. Westerners are thus incorrectly taught to recognize behaviours as indicating one's caste, not one's *jāti*.

The concept of *jāti* cannot be separated from basic concepts of Hinduism such as *dharma*, *karma* and *saṃsāra*. For a Hindu, birth in a given *jāti* is predetermined by his *karma* accumulated in previous lives, which were also spent in different *jātis*, often not with a human appearance. The present life creates the causes for the future one and predestines a particular *jāti* in which a person will be born. The Brahmans regard people's *jātis* as being a fact within the great variety of natural phenomena. "The term *jāti* refers not only to social classes, but to all categories of beings. Insects, plants, domestic animals, wild animals and celestial beings are all *jātis*, which shows that differences between human castes might be regarded as being as great as differences between different species." (Flood 1996: 58). Human society is thus regarded as a natural com-

ponent of the Universe, and is governed by a cosmic order – the Universal Dharma. Every individual activity should be aimed at the maintenance and safeguarding of the Universal Dharma – this is the "law", or *svadharma* (individualized *dharma*), for every living being of the Universe.

Brahmanic thought assumes that there exists not just the biological species *Homo sapiens* but a great number of human *jātis*. Differences between people belonging to different *jātis* – such as Brahmans, *Teli* oil-pressers, *Kumbhar* potters, *Lohar* blacksmiths and others –, is regarded as being basically the same as the differences in nature between various plants, animals and inanimate substances. *Jātis* are defined in the Brahmanic tradition as possessors of an inborn bodily substance. Different *jātis* possess different *raison d'être*. The principal aspect of this *raison d'être* is an inborn predestination or occupational specialization; i.e., *jāti-dharma*. There is a popular saying: "A caterpillar is born to eat leaves, a water-bearer to bring water to houses." Hindus are taught that the Brahmans are born to offer sacrifices and to recite the Vedas and to teach and to instruct people. A weaver is born to make clothing and temple curtains. A warrior's *dharma* requires killing while a thief's *dharma* implies stealing, etc. The existence of a great variety of *jātis*, each possessing predestination, is a necessary condition of Universal harmony. Cooperation between different human *jātis* is a guarantee of harmonized social life which contributes to the maintenance of Universal Dharma. This way, the Brahmanic ideology of *jāti-dharma* arranges different *jātis* in the division of labour, in maintaining social stability and in performing rituals in a proper way.

Jāti-dharma, or the law of existence for a *jāti*, is determined by the "inborn" profession (occupation) which is regarded as the only one appropriate to precisely that *jāti's* way of earning its living and as its social duty as well. The working activity prescribed by *jāti-dharma*; i.e., acknowledged by the society, is regarded as a life-long act of religious piety, as a *dharma*-fulfilling deed. It is the fulfillment of one's *jāti-dharma* which makes a person a practising Hindu. If he is not a Brahman he is not required to concentrate on performing rituals by the altar; rather, his ritual practice consists in the performance of his own "inborn" labour obligations to the benefit of caste society. The artisan *jātis* in particular have minutely articulated the outline of the technical and ritual procedure (*śīlpaśāstra*) for their long-life ritual of producing artefacts. Artisan's work is in competition with the Creation, and has special magical aspects.

The requirements of *jāti-dharma* and the rules of commensality tend to overwhelm the outsider with their scrupulous regulations of everyday life which is subsequently interpreted as "a lack of freedom." The underlying principle is that the higher the caste the stricter are its rules of social contacts and marriage.³ As K. Klostermaier (1989: 59) wrote, "Hinduism may appear to be very vague and extremely tolerant to the outsider, but the insider must conform to very precise regulations of life within the group."

Nonetheless, in Western theories of caste there is no place for the concept of *jāti-dharma*. Even Dumont's theory, which highlights a religious obligation to keep ritual purity, does not

³ The tendency of the castes towards minimization of their contacts with the "aliens" leads to the segregation of the social strata of the so-called "untouchables" (also known as *harijān* "God's people" or *dalit* "oppressed") – officially defined as "scheduled castes."

mention *jāti-dharma* as the religious duty of a person to work in accordance with their "inborn" profession, together with that person's associates in the *jāti*.

The concept of *jāti-dharma* is closely connected to the principle of Sanskritization. Present-day multi-ethnicity and social diversity in India is a result of Sanskritization (lit. "acculturation")⁴ or the process of inclusion of Indian aboriginals into the structures of Indo-Aryan culture and the extension of Brahmans' spiritual power over the masses of aboriginal populations of the Indian subcontinent.⁵ Successive waves of foreign invaders had settled in India (like the Persians, the Greeks, the Śakas, the Ephtalites, the Shans and others) and these were also assimilated by Sanskritization. This process of implanting the Brahmanic ritual and social hierarchy onto the subcontinent was based on the concept of "culture" (*sanskṛti*) in contrast to "nature" (*prakṛti*).

As the result of Sanskritization, Hindu society developed its cellular structure and Hindu culture acquired variability. This variability is maintained by the Brahmanic concept of *svadharma*, i.e. a sacralization of the way of living of every "kind of people created by gods." Many pre-Brahmanic cultures maintain their existence and are even strengthened by caste isolation. Sanskritized ethnic elements now form a part of the Indian population by being castes of ethnic origin or by being tribe-to-caste transitional units. Sanskritization of tribes continues even today: the Brahmanized tribes are classified by Hindu society as lower "scheduled" castes. For example, some hunters and gatherers take basket-weaving as their caste occupation, while maintaining their tribal organization (sometimes, they trace their descent through the maternal line), and tribal religions.

The institution of *jāti* and the ideology of *jāti-dharma* is evidently an instrument of social inequality. Nevertheless, it guaranteed social security by the division of labour and played a crucial role in preventing pandemics in over-populated India and secured the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups.

For social groups that lived under the conditions of an oppressive tropical climate, encapsulation was, in a way, advantageous. Caste regulations and taboos seem to be an adaptation strategy of pre-Aryan aboriginal tribes, interpreted by priestly elite as magic requiring hygienic necessities and sanctified as a religious requirement to keep ritual purity in the "defiling" contacts with the "aliens" (i.e., with those who are not included in one's own *jāti*). For this reason, social interaction in economic or everyday life is minimized to the utmost extent possible. There exists a gradation of contacts in accordance with their closeness: an accidental encounter on the road, staying together in a cloistered place, touching, sitting close to one another, taking water from one's hands, taking food from one's hands, smoking together, eating together, and finally conjugal relations. The closer the contacts are the narrower is the circle of contacting people. Ac-

⁴ This term was coined by M.N. Srinivas (1952) for the situations of upward social mobility within the caste system. In my opinion, Sanskritization is a unique and universal way of socialization for any *jāti* in India – whether it is a Hindu *jāti* eager to improve its status or a *jāti* just holding an intention to become a Hindu *jāti*. In multiethnic and multicultural Hindu society, Sanskritization produces different effects. It is the main cause of cultural diversity and of the countless number of gods in the Hindu pantheon.

⁵ Countries of South East Asia also experienced Brahmanic Sanskritization.

According to Srinivas (1952: 28): "The concept of pollution governs relations between different castes. This concept is absolutely fundamental to the caste system and along with the concepts of *karma* and *dharma* it contributes to make caste the unique institution it is."

Dumont (1988: 109) further observes: "Following most of the literature, the regulation of marriage is an expression of the principle of separation: castes separate themselves from one another by prohibiting marriage outside the group, just as they forbid contact and commensality between persons belonging to different groups." Yet "Rules of endogamy are to be observed in societies all over the world, however, and the desire to maintain 'purity of blood' is not, according to cultural anthropologists, the sole and invariable explanation of all such rules." (Klassmann: 189).

A cultural anthropologist would welcome the thesis that caste is essentially tribal in origin (see Lévi-Strauss 1963: 1-11) since anthropological evidence supports this assertion. There is a great probability that the very concept of *jāti* is inherited from prehistoric tribal egalitarianism with its kin-based patterns of social relations, solidarity and exchange of resources (distributive economics). A *jāti*, as a social category, grew out of an idea that only a closed group of real and would-be relatives can "share a common destiny;" i.e., a way of life and earning a living. Strict endogamy protects a community's property (women as well) from claimant strangers. In many cases, *jāti* is either a tribe which survived until nowadays (as ethnic castes) or newly formed quasi-tribes; i.e., communal associations (the cases of Brahman, artisan and menial castes). Caste organization petrifies the archaic forms of social relations and identities.

Certain archaic ideas regarding commensality and marriage as being magically important activities are essential for caste organization. These ideas underlie the notion of *birādarī* or *bhāicāra* (lit. brotherhood). *Birādarī* implies status parity between families and kin groups, so that people connected by *birādarī* create a circle of equals that is called by the same word *birādarī*. Status parity is important in every aspect of social communications, including marital relations. In the latter case, a number of parity exogamic groups (i.e. *kulas*, *gotras*, *pangālis*, *vakaiyaras* and others) form a marriage circle (*birādarī*). Those belonging to it may intermarry without losing their social status. They need not care about the so called "caste hypergamy" because in patriarchal communities men and their parental families always have higher status than women and their kinship groups. This "pool of marital partners" makes up a *jāti* which can, therefore, be regarded as an endogamous unit in which "communicating on equal footing" is practiced in the form of isogamy or hypergamy; i.e., *anuloma*. *Birādarī*, or the status equality (status parity) is a structural principle no less important for caste organization than hierarchy,⁶ but it remains underestimated in academic research as the latter is totally captivated by "caste hierarchy."

Egalitarian tribal ideology is cultivated in a group of "untouchable" castes even today. Many of them made a transition from tribe to caste quite recently and continue to follow the full range of their tribal stereotypes. Being regarded as ritually polluted, these *dalit jātis* are socially

⁶ The importance of these two principles is reflected; e.g., in the Brahmanic term *anuloma*.

discriminated against, politically oppressed and constitute the poorest segment of rural populations.

In the *jātis* having this low rank, equality is scrupulously maintained through reciprocal exchange in food, women and products of labor: "To consume one's own money, food, resources, or women would be to live in a world without social relations. Gift-exchange and public consumption engender social relationships Prestige is acquired through generosity in exchange, the number of the guests feasted, lavishness of food served, expensiveness of gifts distributed and money spent for performing rituals." (Randeria 1990/91: 309-310). Life-crisis rituals, especially those related to death, are regarded as socially endorsed situations marked by different types of public exchange. One should not think that these fundamental principles of social life are practiced only among the "untouchables" or the tribals. The Vedic literature with its rituals and sacrifices, the Epics and their early inscriptions all contain numerous stories of Kṣatriya rulers feeding the Brahmans in this or that way. The most pious of them gave out everything and thereby left themselves empty-handed. As Randeria (1990/91: 296) expressed it: "We exchange women where we exchange food." These words sound like a voice of past generations echoing from ancient times, and this explains the tribal nature of the *jāti* with its archaic ideology much better than do many theoretical hypotheses.

Current theories of caste incorrectly regard the caste social institution as something entirely different from a tribe. As far back as 1894, the French Sankritologist, E. Senart (1894), supposed that the prototype of the caste was an Indo-European kin unit corresponding to primitive *gens* or clans, and that the idea of caste derives from the family worship and family meal of the kinship group. For years this assumption was severely criticized and dismissed. An arrogant rejection of tribal sociology was typical of the description of the sociology of caste throughout the twentieth century. For example, Dumont (1988:112) stated that: "Clans, like castes, depend by definition on their regulation of marriage. Clan – generally at any rate – is accompanied by exogamy, the obligation to marry outside; caste, on the contrary, entails, in relation to its mode of descent, the obligation to marry within. Let us note in passing, that compared with a tribe which breaks down into clans, caste society represents a higher order of complexity, since each caste generally has its exogamous clan, or its equivalent." Nevertheless, the real inner structure of the *jāti* is that of a kinship structure. This side of caste society has not been studied by non-Indian scholarship: "The Indian social structure ... is quite different from that of a consanguineal community, such as Japan, where people have a high esteem for blood-relationship, real or fictional Indians consider religion as being above consanguinity." (Nakamura 1971: 123). In reality there is no need to develop a universal pattern of kinship. Instead, it should be taken into consideration that caste society is a system of many heterogeneous *jātis*, each having their own kinship organization and marriage rules, as well as peculiar features of their material and spiritual cultures ('God created them as such'). Thus is revealed the ethnicity of *jāti*. 'Endogamy bounds the *jāti*, which is kept as a firm unit by the strong taboo on marrying out of the *jāti*. If we coin the term *excest* for this taboo, we can say that the horror of *excest* in village India is almost as powerful as the horror of incest.'" (Mandelbaum 1970:231).

Hutton (1946: 48-49) said: "As in the case of the composition of a caste by subcastes, the composition of a caste or subcaste by *gotra* is extremely variable and often anomalous." This "anomalousness" of the inner structure of *jātis* depends on marriage customs. Especially notorious are the Southern Indian marriage customs. In matrilineal communities of South India, the cross-cousin marriage (especially a marriage with a daughter of mother's brother) is regarded as the most preferable.

Dravidian *jātis* of South India still keep the tradition of abiding by large kinship communities with these communities mostly being matrilineal. Naturally, they have no agnate exogamy at the level of a *gotra*. However, the exogamy of a matrilineal clan is strictly observed. It is articulated in Dravidian terms through establishing cousins' approximate age and their precise descent.

The circle of people belonging to a *kula/gotra* is defined by "prohibition of marriage." Outlining the contours of this circle is one of the main concerns of *śāstric* law. The *dharmaśāstras* describe in detail *kulas/gotras* and other kinship categories of the Brahmans as an example to be followed. These are *sagotra*, lit "from one cow-shed," and *sapinda*, lit. "tied by offerings to the deceased" (or "those who have the same limbs of the body"). *Sagotra* and *sapinda* are groups of kindred who participate in the same life-crisis rituals (*saṃskāra*).

Kula/gotra is a circle of people who, by birthright, may pretend to occupy certain social positions and to inherit wealth and the possibility to earn more through *jāti* occupation. The acknowledged circle of relatives ardently defend their position and wealth, while such common features of the caste as "hereditary profession" (more precisely, the working place) is passed to someone belonging to this circle only.

By establishing marital ties, exogamic communities create a locus for the *jāti* (common territory of the caste), thus bringing into existence the *jāti* itself as an endogamous entity. Many of them emerged as circles of marital ties between exogamous *gotras* and *kulas* having the same professional occupations or other equal parameters of their status (*birādarī*). Endogamy appeared in such circles in this process and as a result of unification. This is an explanation for the fact that castes exist only as regional phenomena.

This correlation is obvious in the communities separated from the mass of caste society, in places where limited living conditions and an absence of traditionally established choices lead to the formation of new circles of marital and inter-group contacts. For example, in isolated groups of the cis-Himalayan region there exists a version of hypergamous *birādarī*, while in Indian communities located outside South Asia there appear to be entirely new marks of statuses' parity.

The concept of *jāti* as a divinely created social structure results in the tolerability of the social macrostructure. All Indian society, including the Hindus, other religious communities (such as the Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims who also have their own varieties of "castes") and the non-caste tribal periphery, is organized into numerous *jātis* or social groups.

Kula naturally has a *dharma* of its own. *Kula-dharma* determines the set of religious beliefs and rituals that are enacted within a family, and are defined by scholars as the "religious practice of Hinduism." Life-crisis rituals, ancestor worshipping *śraddhā* rituals, *kula-devī* mother goddess worship and others – all these relate to *kula-dharma*. Very often *kulas* have a totem of their own, usually being a special kind of tree. *Kulas* of middle and low castes worship cults and

exercise practices of 14 Tamil politician who was born to a family of illiterate shepherds of the Kuruma caste, who wrote in his autobiography: "We knew nothing of Brahma, Vishnu or Eswara until we entered a school. When we first heard about these figures they were as strange to us as Allah or Jehova or Jesus were."

A Hindu does not select but receives devotional preferences in his family group, because he inherits them from his ancestors through his father (in the patrilineal system) or from mother's brother (in the matrilineal system). Hinduism as worship primarily exists in a family group, *kula/gotra* being the most important of them.

A Brahman *gotra* has no non-Sanskritized objects of worship, especially one like a *kula-devī*. They are the priests for whom a *kula-dharma* is substituted with a school of Vedic ritual with its accepted hymns and sacred texts; this identification is recited in *pravara* formulae. Restriction on marriage is also exercised according to *pravara*. The *upanayana* rite is an initiation into a Brahmanic *gotra* in which the initiated person joins the lineage of his spiritual ancestors.

On account of *kula-dharma* many different models of piety can coequally exist in Hinduism. The varieties of worshipping practices are remarkably vast because these are regarded as family and lineage traditions which have to be maintained for the purpose of showing respect to ancestors and to the guardian goddess of the clan. Hinduism acquired its eclectic form in the process of Sanskritization and the incorporation of various Vedic and non-Vedic cults into a unified entity directed by the so-called Great Tradition of Hinduism.

A special place is allotted to Hindu sects like Bishnoi, Jogi, Gosain, Ramanandi and others. Being in a way "artificial formations," they actually do not differ from other *jātis* and structure themselves in accordance with *kulas*. The most full-fledged sectarian *jātis* are the Jains and the Lingayats.

There are many spiritual orders, especially in the *bhakti (bhakti sampradāya)* that also structure themselves as *jātis*. New members may enter these orders, though not by their birthright through a common *jāti* but through the rite of initiation, as in a Brahmanic *gotra*. An order may consist of (though not necessarily) unmarried ascetics, like the Ramanandi order. However, many other orders also accept married householders. If their children wish to become members of such an order they are obliged to undergo the initiation ritual.

In our approach to the problem of defining a caste, the caste can be defined as a cluster of several endogamous *jātis* of equal status such as the India-wide *Mochis* or *Kumbhars*, or even *Maharashtrian Kunbis* of different varieties. This is why a *jāti* is considered to be a "sub-caste." The process of caste formation was greatly influenced by the fact that castes were included in special lists when the *Censuses of India* were taken. As a consequence, the *jāti* names that derived from an occupation became nominated as castes. This nomenclature concerns, in particular, artisans: carpenters, potters, jewelers and other castes of artisans and these castes are always multi-component. However, the dominant procedure is the speculative theory of "splitting" and "fission" of castes into subcastes.

Caste, being a category of hierarchy and status, became a counterpart to *varṇa* and this allows a stranger to evaluate *jāti* statuses in their boundless variety. An Indian in traditional ways to socially identify himself or any other person. There is a *jāti* identity, while a caste identity can

only sometimes be found to be useful by an Indian. Caste denotes the level of a person's status ranking.

Caste, as a complex of "characterizing features" enumerated in much detail in the scholarly literature, entered Indian life from the pages of books and documents written by foreigners. As a result, today many Indians identify themselves and describe their society using loanwords taken from foreign accounts. For example, in the period after the Census of India was taken in 1961, numerous descriptions of Indian villages were given only using caste terminology, and just mentioning subcastes, etc. In fact, it is the wide variety of the *jāti* world with its ethnic, social, professional, religious, tribal and other components that should be studied.

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