

Sanskritization and Caste Opposition:

A Shift from Ritual to Politico-economic Power

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Introduction

Although 'Sanskritization' had been a popular term among sociologists and anthropologists during the decades of fifties and sixties, the concept gradually faltered after modernization and westernization took precedence over it. However, the concept has again been able to get attention of intellectuals, especially of those who involve in discourses on Dalit in Nepal, engaged in imitating the higher castes especially after the reinstatement of democracy in 1990 that opened up the new avenues for caste mobility and opposition. Teetotalism, vegetarianism, temple building and its worship, fasting, reading religious books, discarding carcass, wearing sacred thread etc by Dalits are some of the examples of imitations. It is commonly presumed by the Nepalese social scientists especially by Dalits that such imitations are Sanskritization. Therefore, given the changing caste structure and function in the Nepalese society the present article attempts to answer questions as to; whether such imitations are Sanskritization, what the relationship is between imitation and caste notion and hierarchy and how caste has been functioning in present society and is understood by Dalit. The paper has been prepared on the basis of a field work in four Dalit settlements in Pokhara for four months.

Sanskritization: A Contested Term

The term Sanskritization for the first time, is defined by M.N Srinivas in his book "Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India as thus;

"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 so 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 rituals and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically

forbidden. This process has been called “Sanskritization” in this book, in preference to “Brahminization”, as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other “twice-born” castes (Srinivas, 1952)”.

According to this definition it was only the Brahmins who were imitated by lower castes to Sanskritize their life. He found that it was not the Brahmin but the dominant castes of the region were imitated by the lower castes. This fact made him revise his earlier definition of Sanskritization as “ the process by which a low Hindu or tribal or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of high, and frequently, the twice-born caste (Srinivas, 1956). He has pointed three essential characteristics of Sanskritization: first, it is a group process which does not apply to an individual; second, it needs a number of generations before it is successfully completed; and third, it seems to be a process that has never worked for the untouchables who are below the ritual barrier of pollution. Several factors influence the process of Sanskritization such as economic betterment, the acquisition of political power, education, leadership, and a desire to move up in the hierarchy, are all relevant factors in Sanskritization, and each case of Sanskritization may show all or some of these factors mixed up in different measures (Srinivas, 1956).

Although the credit of devising the term goes to M N Srinivas, Indian Dalit leader Dr Ambedker had also used similar concept in Dalit movement before Srinivas (Jafferlot, 2005). Ambedker advised his followers (Dalits) to imitate Brahmanic values and practices for achieving a respectable position in society. He initially asserted that discarding traditions of Dalits and imitating that of higher castes emancipates Dalits from their oppressions. However, in the following years he himself came against this idea of emancipation and turned to the rejection of Hinduism. Although the concept gained a wide attention of sociologists and anthropologists, it is not escaped from the criticisms -Carroll (1997), Sharma (1970), Staal (1963), Singer (1959), and Marriot (1959) are at the forefront. Staal (1963) the strongest critics of Sanskritization, argued that the concept Sanskritization as a complex concept or as a class of concepts is misleading since its relationship

to the term Sanskrit is extremely complicated. He found that Sanskritization covered the cases where influence of Sanskrit and the amount of Sanskrit material decreased. He argued that what is often called by anthropologists as non-Sanskritic traditions have roots in Sanskritic traditions. Similarly Carroll (1977) questions the relevance of Sanskritization arguing that ‘the concept is not only irrelevant as employed in regard to the association of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, but also that the concept itself is faulty and that it’s uncritical application forces upon historical material interpretation at variance with empirical evidence.

Milton Singer (1959) virtually discarded the distinction of great and little tradition saying “the real structure of tradition, in any civilization or part thereof, is an immensely intricate system of relationships between the levels or components of traditions which we oversimplify by referring to as ‘high’ and ‘low’ or ‘great’ or ‘little’ (cited in Staal 1963). Similarly, L. Dumont and D Pocock (1959) reject the Sanskritic/ non-Sanskritic dichotomy interpreting Sanskritization not as the imposition of a different system up on an old one, but as the acceptance of a more distinguished or prestigious way of saying the same thing (cf. Staal, 1963). The criticism of Sanskritization does not restrict only in Sanskritic / non-Sanskritic dichotomy as some anthropologists say it as too Brahminocentric which always distinguishes Brahmin - non-Brahmin values and does not talk about the oppression of the Brahmins on the lower castes. Parvathamma (1978) while commenting on the book by Srinivas (1976) writes “in all writing of Srinivas, the Brahmin-non-Brahmin values are juxtaposed. Hierarchy based on pollution-purity remains intrinsic to Srinivas thinking in regard to all aspects of human life, even if it is actually not so pronounced...so he has endorsed Brahmanical sociology” (cited in Sharma, 1994).

Regarding the Sanskritization of Dalits or untouchables there is a doubt whether they achieve higher status and cross ritual barrier. Srinivas says that Sanskritization does not always result in the higher status for the Sanskritized caste, and this is clearly exemplified by the untouchables. However, the Sanskritization of an untouchable group may be, it is unable

to cross the barrier of untouchability. An untouchable caste is always forced to remain as an untouchable (Srinivas, 1952). For reason, Ambedker in his later years of movement discarded the Sanskritization since he did not find any hope of emancipation remaining in Hindu caste structures. He stated “I stand today absolutely convinced that for the depressed classes there can be no equality among the Hindus because of the inequality in the foundation of Hinduism. We, no longer want to be part of the Hindu society (Jaffrelot, 2005). Hence, these critical researches suggest that the concept Sanskritization should be used very cautiously by revising it rather than completely discarding because the relevance of caste system has been decreasing continuously in present society. Three types of scholars, who have worked on Sanskritization seem to exist, first; those who completely reject Sanskritization since the Sanskritic / non-sanskritic dichotomy is irrelevant; second, those who accepts the theory considering it as an effective tool to study caste society; and third, those who neither completely discard it nor accept, however, they assert the concept must be used by revising it according to the context.

Sanskritic / Non-Sanskritic Dichotomy: An Illusion

It is normally said that the traditions of Brahmins are Sanskritic whereas that of Dalis are non-Sanskritic. But the questions as to what are the differences that distinguish the traditions as Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic are unanswerable. This seems just as the prejudice of the so called higher castes to consider their culture as superior and a means of subordination. The main way of distinguishing traditions among castes is the rituals and Gods they worship. In this context, there seems a lot of differences between the traditions of Janjati and Brahmins. But it becomes very hard to see differences between the traditions of Dalits and the Brahmins as both of them worship similar gods and have similar rituals. Few visible differences were resulted due to the restrictions made on certain activities in the rituals such as ban on wearing sacred thread and reading Veda by Dalits. Consuming beef and pork has not have made Dalit traditions polluted and non-Sanskritic and, even can not be considered as non-Sanskritic as well because Sanskritic traditions are heavily based on the traditions what we

call now as non-Sanskritic. If we look at Mahabharat age, cow slaughtering was an important festival and was most essential to honor the guest. It can also be proved by the fact that consuming pork by Magars and beef by Tamangs does not make them polluted and are not below pollution barrier in Hindu caste hierarchy.

It is implausible to say that a culture is Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic as it is composed of both sanskritic and non-sanskritic elements. It can be argued that the culture of Dalits is more a Sanskritic than a non-Sanskritic. All the rituals of Dalits including rite de passage, worshipping and celebration of festivals are similar to that of Brahmins. In many of the worships and rituals Dalits use to employ Brahmin priests where as even Brahmins do the same. Therefore a question arises here as to how a ritual performed by the same Brahmin priest can be impure in Dalits house and pure in Brahmin's house. Sanskritic/non-Sanskritic confusion as raised by Staal (1963) has been central problem in studying Dalits as their traditions. Although they do not have access to temples, they worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses similar to that of higher castes from beginning. Similarly, consuming pig does not pollute the Magars and Tamangs much as does the Dalits. And Magars and Tamangs have relatively higher ritual status. These arguments show that it is not reasonable to say that the traditions of Dalits are non-Sanskritic and impure. Moreover, at present, the high castes themselves have been avoiding Sanskritic traditions and are accepting the so-called non-Sanskritic traditions. For instance, it has been common for a Brahmin to consume alcohol, buff and pork now a days which was strongly forbidden earlier. They are highly influenced by modern value system and their traditions and practices incorporate such values rather than as described by Sanskritic sculptures. So it is plausible to state here that Sanskritization of a caste can not occur if the destination caste (high caste) itself is avoiding Sanskritic traditions, and so is the case of Dalits.

Srinivas (1952) himself accepts the fact that any tradition can not be called absolutely Sanskritic or non-Sanskritic, it varies only in degree. He argues that "the hierarchical system, with the Brahmin and untouchable at the

end, represents a fusion of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic ritual and beliefs. Each caste has both Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic rituals and beliefs, but the proportion in which the two are found together vary from caste to caste and also from region to region". The culture of Dalits contains more Sanskritic elements than non-Sanskritic. The arguments clearly tell that the culture of Dalits can not be considered as non-Sanskritic. Therefore, applying Sanskritization concept on studying socio-cultural changes among Dalits is irrelevant. Rather, the phenomenon Dalits are exhibiting can be considered as the opposition of the privileges of the higher castes offered by the caste system instead of imitating them.

Caste Opposition: A Lens to View Caste Society

Dalits never accepted the caste principles; they have been made to accept it forcefully. Dalits opposed the caste system and its oppression and exploitation since its inception and the history of caste opposition is as old as the caste system (Jyothi and Raj, 2005). However, the opposition of the Dalits has been misconceived as Sanskritization. Although, the present socio-cultural changes among the Dalits seems like Sanskritization (B K, 2006), the converse seems to be true while going carefully into it. The reasons behind it are multifarious; first, the traditions and practices Dalits are adopting are not true Sanskritic as defined by Sanskritic sculptures. Although they perform the rites and rituals of higher castes they do not follow the Sanskritic process. For instance, it is found that the Dalits have become priest but he/she does not have any change in food habits and customs. Most of the Dalit priests seemed consuming meat and alcohol, and not performing Sanskritic traditions such as daily bath, reading religious books, using *Chandan* etc. They still possess so-called non-Sanskritic traditions in them. Second, Dalits do not favor caste system, instead, are searching egalitarian, non-Brahmanic society where the status is not determined by one's ritual merits and the caste. This statement does not conform to Sanskritization because a low caste should accept the caste system and the privilege of higher caste to be Sanskritized. But, Dalits are seeking political and economic power rather than the ritual power, and the faith on religion has been gradually disappearing. Third, Sanskritization, according to Srinivas,

requires a group involvement not an individual. The Sanskritizing caste must claim high castes, and must achieve higher status, which do not seem to be present among Dalits. And, the fourth, Dalits do not see Sanskritization as a means of upward mobility in the present milieu of democracy where all -state to political parties, and civil society to donor agency, are prioritizing Dalits in their agendas. They have better opportunity and easy way to achieve higher status, which the Sanskritization aims at, in democracy. Sanskritization occurs only in strict caste structures where others ways for mobility become impossible.

The socio-cultural changes among Dalits seemed to be occurring in two sub-processes, reformation and assertion. Reformation has been accompanied by adoption of certain practices which belonged to the higher castes earlier such as fasting, daily worship, performing *Bratabandha*, acting as astrologer etc and rejection of the practices which they thought were non-Sanskritic and polluting such as pig raising, alcoholism, traditional occupations etc. In the same way, Dalits seemed accepting certain practices that they thought were their rights. Temple entrance and worship, writing *thar* as surname, wearing *janai* etc have been conspicuous among Dalits that are claimed as their rights. These socio-cultural changes among Dalits seem to be influenced by two factors, modern values and disapproval of caste system and the privileges of higher castes. Reduction in pig-raising and alcoholism is due to the education and growing awareness of Dalits rather than Sanskritic influence. Similarly, temple entrance and worship, wearing Janai seem to be occurring as an opposition of and question to high caste privilege and supremacy. In Dalit's eyes, it was Brahmins who were torturing the Dalits by creating untouchability and the caste system for their benefits. Thus it can be concluded that these are the manifestations of the strong disapproval of caste system and hierarchy and thus, they like to destroy the castes system.

New Legal Code 1963, Constitution of 1990 and Interim Constitution 2007 all have treated everybody equal before the law and have ended the discriminations on the basis of castes at least in written form. However, it

is still strong in practice. Religious primacy in state ruling has been eliminated constitutionally by the Interim Constitution 2007 declaring the state as secular. New economic opportunities such as foreign employment, government and private jobs, business etc have de-linked Dalits from their patron i.e. higher castes. Similarly the government's systematic Five Years Plans of development has been giving priorities to Dalits which have helped them enter into new world values and thinking. Western education system based on modern value system has been accessible to Dalits and has increased their literacy rate significantly, which has made ground to question caste system and hierarchy. Parliamentary democracy and universal suffrage system have enabled Dalits to bargain and force the leaders and the government for their betterments. And now caste neither encompasses ritual power nor economic and political power. All these changes have played a vital role in reducing the relevance and legitimacy of caste system and have encouraged Dalits exercise economic and political power rather than ritual power. In addition, the focus of Dalits now has gone to the acquisition of political representations and power in constituent assembly after April movement of 2006.

Now, it is perceived that the rural and traditional patron-client relationship and attitude have disappeared and shifted to another stronger patron, the state or government. Similarly the dependency of Dalits also has shifted to the state whose socialistic goals and commitment to uplift Dalits have led to expect much. They have conceived that it is only the state that can help them to better their life. At present, they are very hopeful that *Loktantra* surely emancipates them from the age-long oppression and domination of caste system and hierarchy. As a result, political power has been recognized as a major force to pressurize and lobby the government and the parties, and for reason Dalits have formed various caste associations and are actively involving in Dalit wings of political parties to gain power. And, caste has been variable in politics. Political parties themselves have politicized the castes; caste and especially Dalit issues have been made central focus of all parties and have promised to include the Dalits in every structure of state and their party. As a consequence, Dalits are seeking political and

economic power rather than ritual by means of Sanskritization. Hence, the socio-cultural activities of Dalits such as temple entrance and worship, use of surname, discarding their traditional practices, wearing sacred thread etc are the manifestations of caste opposition which was heightened after the reinstatement of democracy in 1990 and people's movement in 2005. The major issue Dalits raise -be it an individual or an organized group of mothers, club, caste association or political organization, have been the caste system and untouchability. Therefore, caste opposition has been an effective and an essential tool to study the caste society and especially Dalit society in Nepal.

Conclusion

Sanskritization as defined and described by Srinivas, is not occurring in Nepalese Dalit society. The main purpose of Sanskritization -ascending to higher caste status through gaining ritual power - does not seem working in Dalits since they do not want the status in the name of caste and are searching an egalitarian casteless society. Political and economic power have been sought and taken as only means of their uplift rather than the ritual. Instead of conforming in caste system, they want destroy the system. Increasing caste awareness and changing political milieu have resulted in increased opposition of caste system. The socio-cultural activities of Dalit that are conspicuous at present and seem to be Sanskritization, are the manifestations of caste oppositions. Therefore, caste opposition can be an effective and an essential tool to study the Dalit society in Nepal.

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