

CASTE SYSTEM: THEORIES AND PRACTICES IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

There has been a long debate in the literature over whether the caste system is a unique social phenomenon or simply one manifestation of processes of social stratification which have a wider generality. New divisions and differentiations have been giving rise to new antagonism and social norms. Caste is not today what it was before 1950; and it has not become completely class or replica of it in Nepal.

KEY WORDS: *Caste, Theoretical Debate, Muluki Ain, Discrimination, State Policy, Changing Context*

INTRODUCTION

Social stratification is the ordering of social differences with the help of a set of criteria or just a single criterion which ties the differentiated strata into a system (Gupta 2000). Caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender are some of the pertinent categories of social hierarchy and differentiation in many societies. The term 'Caste' has been used to mean different things by different people in a variety of situations. What people mean by caste in day-to-day life is different from the meaning it has in the traditional literatures, or from what people consider to be its traditional and orthodox meaning (Béteille 1965:45). Sometimes by 'caste' people mean a small and more or less localised group; at other times the same word is used to refer to a collection of such groups. The paper starts with sociological and anthropological understandings of caste system and its variations. The state policy regarding caste system in Nepal and its current status are also briefly discussed.

CASTE SYSTEM: THEORETICAL DEBATE

The word 'caste' is of Portuguese origin and was applied to India by the Portuguese in the middle of fifteenth century. Caste may be defined 'as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes

includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system (Béteille 1965:46)'. Berreman (1967:70) has defined the caste system as a 'system of birth-ascribed stratification, of socio-cultural pluralism, and of hierarchical interaction'. In the word of Sinha (1967:94), 'caste is a hierarchy of endogamous groups, organized in a characteristic hereditary division of labour'.

In the writing of anthropologists and sociologists the word 'caste' is used in two different senses. On the one hand it is a word used without any particular geographical limitation to denote the type of class system in which hierarchy is very sharply defined and in which the boundaries between the different layers of the hierarchy are rigidly fixed (Leach 1967:9). A ruling class may be described as a caste when the fact of class endogamy is strikingly obvious and when the inheritance of privilege has become narrowly restricted to members of that caste in perpetuity. This kind of situation is likely to arise when the ruling group is distinguished from the inferior group or groups by wide differences of standard of living or by other easily recognized labels (Leach 1967:9). Thus, it is usually easy to locate an individual in his stratum, and when this is done, one knows how to deal with him even without knowing him personally. If X belongs to the first stratum and Y to the second one, X will be considered socially superior to Y, irrespective of their personal qualities, and be treated accordingly.

The other use of word 'caste' is to define the system of social organization found in traditional regional societies of India and among adjacent Hindu and related populations in the territories of Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka (Dumont 1980; Marriott and Inden 1985:348; Leach 1967:9) and surviving to a large extent to the present day.

Clearly there has been a long debate in the literature over whether the caste system is a unique social phenomenon or simply one manifestation of processes of social stratification which have a wider generality (Leach 1960: 2; Sinha 1967: 93; Gould 1990: 2; Berreman 1968:333). Such presentations rise directly the question as to whether caste is best considered as a cultural or as a structural phenomenon (Leach 1960:1). This is an issue on which the authorities seem notably

confused. Weber, for example, states categorically that ‘caste ... is the fundamental institution of Hinduism (Gerth and Mills 1947 cited Leach 1960: 2)’. He implies thereby that caste is a specifically cultural concept, but then he proceeds at once to the remark that ‘there are also castes among the Mohammedans of India.... Castes are also found among Buddhists (ibid.)’. This contradiction leads logically enough to an inquiry into the nature of caste, but here Weber’s standpoint keeps shifting. Having started by implying that caste is peculiarly a Pan-Indian phenomenon, he proceeds immediately to the discussion of caste analogues in non-Indian contexts. Similarly, those ‘diffusionist’ writers who manage to find historical examples of caste behaviour all the way from Ancient Egypt to modern Fiji (e.g. Hocart 1950; Hutton 1946), start by assuming that caste is definable as a list of ethnographic traits characteristics of Hindu India and then slide imperceptively into the assumption that caste refers to certain features of social structure (Leach 1960: 2).

The work of Dumont and Pocock, Marriott and Inden, and their students, and the views of Leach have stressed that the caste is to be defined in terms of its Hindu attributes and rationale, and therefore, is unique to Hindu India or at least to South Asia (Berreman 1968:333). That of Bailey, Barth, Bêteille, Berreman, Passion, De Vos and Wagatsuma have stressed that the caste system is to be defined in terms of structural features which are found not only in Hindu India but the number of other societies as well (Gould 1990:2). The latter group of scholars tend to take the view that cross-cultural comparisons can be effective only on the level of social structure and not in terms of cultural pattern and value system (Sinha 1967: 93). Those who hold the latter view find caste groups in such widely scattered areas as the Arabian Peninsula, Polynesia, North Africa, East Africa, Guatemala, Japan, Aboriginal North America and the contemporary United States. In my opinion, whether the caste system is viewed from the standpoint of that which makes it indigenously Hindu, or that which links it ascription oriented stratification generally depends on what one choose to emphasize.

Regardless of which side of the argument one chooses, there are certain characteristics of the caste system which are almost universally acknowledged to be associated with it as a socio-cultural institution.

HINDU CASTE SYSTEM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

A fundamental cultural premise for the organization of Hindu society is divided into different genera - *jat* / *jati* (Haaland 1991:160) or groups, known as castes with varying degrees of respectability and circle of social intercourse (Ghurye 1964:1). Each caste is "defined by particular substance and code, which are thought to be inseparable from one another" (Inden and Nicholas cited Haaland 1991:160). It is not permitted to contract marriage with a person of another caste, nor to change from one profession or trade to another, nor for the same person to undertake more than one except when permission is given to account of his dignity.

According to Ghurye (1964), the notion of the caste is fundamentally based on following concepts:

- Segmental division of society,
- Hierarchy,
- Restriction on feeding and social intercourse,
- Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections,
- Restriction on marriage, and
- Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation.

Similarly Hutton (cited in Leach 1960: 2) argues that normally caste conforms to the following criteria:

- A caste endogamous.
- There are restrictions on commensality between members of different castes.
- There is hierarchical grading of castes, the best recognized position being that of the Brahmin at the top.
- The various kinds of contexts, especially those concerned with food, sex and ritual, a member of 'high' caste is liable to be 'polluted' by either direct or indirect contact with a member of a 'low' caste.
- Castes are very commonly associated with traditional occupations.
- A man's caste is finally determined by the circumstances of his birth, unless he comes to be expelled from his caste for some ritual offence.

There are minute rules as to what sort of food or drink can be accepted by a person and from what caste. But there is very great diversity in this matter (Ghurye 1964: 7). All food is divided into two classes, *kachcha* and *pakka*, the former being any food in the cooking of which water has been used, the latter all food cooked in ghee. As a rule 'a man will never eat *kachcha food* unless it is prepared by a fellow caste-man, which in actual practice means a member of his own endogamous group. To take *kachcha* meal with someone is to imply intimacy and approval (Dumont 1980:83-5).

In contrast, *pakka* food is the food of the *bazaar* (market), the food that is eaten at public events and in public places. In India and Nepal this is customarily fried food. Traditionally such foods were fried in ghee, butter and were considered purifying because it (ghee / butter) comes from a sacred animal (cow). This type of food is eaten at public events (within twice-born caste) to each other except given by Sudras. However, there are foods eaten at public events that are not fried in ghee- for example, various kinds of sweets defined as *pakka* is now fried in vegetable oil which is traditionally has no purifying properties.

Concept of pollution or contamination (*jutho*) among Hindus is vested with taboos when associated with food and drinks. The leftover from a plate are regarded as contaminated vis-à-vis other persons who cannot eat this (except wife). This concept also regulates drinking behaviour (e.g. water, tea, milk etc.). If one happens to sip from other person's glass, one is subject to contamination and there is a belief that one will easily get vomit, drunk and get headache etc. Therefore to avoid this, the drinking partners should be careful not to mix their glasses, and if there is some doubt they have to pour out the remaining content of the glasses and wash them before taking another drink.

An awareness of cultural differences, mutual avoidance and social distance is also communicated through preferences and restrictions on commensality held by members of particular caste and religious communities. A higher caste person may have friends and workmates from lower caste communities, whom he meets in the village and at the local market; he does not visit their house, neither accepts to take meal with them, nor invites them into his own house. The avoidance

of close relationship with members of other communities is based on differences in food habits and restrictions following an ideology of what they can consume and what they have to avoid according to their caste and religious affiliation. Twice-born castes (especially orthodox Brahman) avoid eating in Christian's home blaming them that they eat beef and pork. The Muslims don't like to go at Hindus' home because the mutton and chicken prepared has not been slaughtered according to Islamic traditions; the meat is not regarded as *halal*. In traditional Hindu value system, Christians, Muslims, and Sudras are regarded as a same category because these groups eat beef and / or pork. The habit and taboos which are culturally determined are important in the sense that they keep members of different ethnic groups into different social strata. Generally, the higher the status of a caste, the more rigid it is in the matter of accepting food from others. Thus, Brahmans do not accept cooked food from Non- Brahmin, although the latter accept it.

In status group in general and castes in particular, there is a strong tendency towards endogamy and marriage of the equals. Dumont summarises these as follows: " a man of caste X marriage a woman of caste X and the children belong to caste X" (Dumont 1980: 112). This principal of endogamy is a dominant aspect of caste society and is regarded as "the essence of caste system (Westermarck citing Ghurye 1964: 18)". There are, however, a few exceptions to this general rule of marrying within one's own group which are due to the practice of hypergamy. Probably the principle source of hypergamy among Hindus is the concept of *kanyadan*. The concept of *dana* in Sanskrit (*Nep. dan*), refers to a special kind of gift in which something of value is given to upper caste. In the marriage ceremony what is being given is a virgin, that is, a *kanya*. Hence *kanyadan* or "gift of the virgin (Milner 1994: 151)".

In a caste society, a group of persons are engaged in a specific occupation: Brahman priest, Kshatriya warriors, and Vaisya merchants. The lowest ranking is Sudras or occupational groups or untouchables (*Nep. Achhut, Dalit*). The orthodox high caste Nepalese attitude was (generally) that untouchables were regarded just as a service caste. The Kami (blacksmith) exist to make metal work, the Damai (tailors) live to sew clothes, the Sarki's (leather worker) sole purpose on the

earth is to make shoes, and the only reason for the Badi (traditionally singers and dancers but also prostitution as a profession) is to provide sex.

Every individual has own status in the occupational framework of the community. Thus the different castes within a single community participate in non-monetary reciprocal services known as the '*jajmani system*'. '*Jajman*' is a term with origins in the earliest period of Vedic religion. In recent centuries, the core meaning of the term has referred to householders for whom Brahmans carry out religious rituals in exchange for gifts and fees (Dumont 1980:98); they are at the centre of the *jajmani* system, which involves exchanges of a wide array of practical and ritual services. Purely ritual services are provided by Brahman priest and various sectarian castes, and almost all servicing castes have ceremonial and ritual duties at their *jajmans*' birth, marriages, funerals, and at some of the religious festivals. The land owning *jajmans* pay the servicing castes in kind, with grain, clothing, sugar and animal products like butter and milk.

Thus, the Hindu caste system may be defined as a hierarchy of endogamous division in which membership is hereditary and permanent. Here, hierarchy includes inequality both in status and in access to goods and services. There are rigid rules of avoidance between castes, and certain types of contacts are defined as contaminating, while other non-contaminating. The crucial fact is that caste status is determined, and therefore the systems are perpetuated, by birth. Membership in them is ascribed and unalterable. Individuals in low castes are considered inherently inferior and are related to a disadvantaged position, regardless of their behaviour.

The question arises whether the caste system in Hindu texts was made as it is happening today or it was just an occupational specialization rather than religious hierarchy. There is little historical evidence to support the social as well as religious hierarchy based on caste system.

AN OVERVIEW OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL POSITIONS

The questions of caste ideology, which is, how caste systems are

conceived and understood by the people who live their lives within them, is the focus of this essay. As stated earlier, academic definitions of caste are also not solidified, and fall into two mutually exclusive positions. The first school understands Hindu caste as a total symbolic world, unique, self-contained, and not comparable to other systems. Most of these theorists would agree with the classic definition given by Bouglé, who wrote that "the spirit of caste unites these three tendencies: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization (quoted in Barfield 1997: 50-51)"; controversies are primarily over which of these aspects is stressed.

There are structural views of caste as a category or type, comparable in many respects to hierarchical organizations elsewhere. In this vein, Gerald Berreman wrote, for example, "a caste system resembles a plural society whose discrete sections are all ranked vertically (Berreman quoted in Barfield 1997: 51). Indian caste therefore is analogous to social structures elsewhere in which rank is ascribed, such as American racial grading.

Those who argue that caste as a unique phenomenon they are categorized into three sub-categories e.g. Pre-Dumontian views of caste, Dumontian view of caste, and Post-Dumontian views of caste. I have taken Louis Dumont as a central figure who described Hindu caste system intensively. Those who argue that it is a comparable phenomenon are included into comparative or stratification theory of caste.

PRE-DUMONTIAN VIEWS OF HINDU CASTE

When Max Weber prepared his study of religion and society in India, as a part of his famous treatise on the sociology of religion, all the major Sanskrit scriptures of the Hinduism had been made available in high quality translations, through the efforts of orientalist. Weber was well acquainted with these sources, and he was also familiar with the census reports, which he described as "scientifically excellent" (Weber quoted in Lunheim 1993: 64).

Weber considered Indian society an "ideal type" of his general notion of

belief systems as a main determinants of social and economic structure (in contrast to the Marxist view). In India the link between the religious belief and the social differentiation was direct and explicit, whereas in western society the connection was indirect and obscured. Hence caste appeared, to Weber, as an integral aspect of Hinduism, and he starts out by declaring this central notion quite axiomatically: 'before any things else, without caste there is no Hindu' (Weber quoted in Lunheim: 1993:64). Weber then goes on to explore the alleged parallelism between caste and guild. He concludes that there is much more to caste than mere occupational specialization. For instance, the guilds of the European Middle Ages were not closed, endogamous social units like castes. An extensive analogy between caste and guild therefore misses the essential features of both phenomena. This serves to corroborate the major point Weber is out to prove: The formative forces underlying caste are not to be found in economy, or material conditions, but in ideology, i.e. religion, in the shape of Hinduism.

Weber construes caste as a special and extreme case of status groups, whereas a class is constituted by individuals in a matching economic position. The cohesive force of status group is constituted by honour and prestige. To create and maintain identity by imposing restrictions on social intercourse and marriage with those who "do not belong", primarily the inferiors in terms of honour and prestige, is a general feature of social life. In the caste system of India this mechanism is developed to the extreme in strict caste endogamy and the religious concept of pollution. Caste is thus a perfected variety of closed status from class.

The interplay between caste and ideology of rebirth is a main point in Weber's analysis. The ideology of rebirth prescribes strict adherence to one's caste duties and prospect of transcendental rewards in subsequent reincarnations. In Weber's synthetic construction of caste and Hinduism, the *karma* doctrine is the key principle of cosmic reality.

How was it that the karma theology, which is found in several ideologies other than Hinduism, combined in India with caste to form such a peculiar structure? At this final point in his analysis, Weber is rather

uncertain, but pleads in favour of notion of racial differences in ancient India as the main determinant in the evolution of caste. Weber does not elaborate the comparative perspective explicitly, but the juxtaposition is symbolic of how understanding of caste system came to influence sociological thought on the distinctive character of western civilization (Lunheim: 1993).

Although based on secondary sources, Célestine Bouglé's essay stands as an important landmark in the intellectual history of caste. In the introduction to the essays, Bouglé lists what he considers the three defining principles of "the spirit of caste" (Lunheim 1993: 66).

Hereditary Specialization: The hereditary association of caste and a specific trade or profession.

Hierarchy: Personal status, as rights and duties, is unequally divided and determined by the rank of the group to which one belongs.

Repulsion: The phenomena of mutual repulsion between social groups, division into opposed fragments, isolation on the group level and mechanism to prevent alliances and relations across the group boundary, like endogamy, pollution concepts and food taboos.

These three features combined constitute the defining properties of caste. Taking this definition as a starting point, Bouglé discusses if caste ought to be considered an exclusively Indian (Hindu) phenomenon or not (ibid: 66). He concludes, like Weber, that many social systems, including the western ones, exhibit caste-like properties, but that "the spirit of caste" in its fully developed sense, is found only on Indian soil (Lunheim 1993 : 67). Finally Bouglé attributes the hierarchical aspects of castes to the ritual and religious dominance of the Brahmans. Furthermore he is among the scholars to recognise, or at least to emphasise, the crucial distinction between socio-religious rank and secular power in Indian society- thereby initiating a heated discussion in the anthropology of caste. The main first hand impact of Bouglé's essays on caste was Louis Dumont, who considered himself to continue Bouglé's left (Dumont 1980:30).

DUMONTIAN VIEW OF HINDU CASTE

Dumont, the best known of symbolic school, based his interpretation of caste on the attributes of hierarchy and repulsion. He focused on the rigidity of caste position at each end of the hierarchical spectrum (Brahman and out-castes) and the radical opposition in Hindu thought between categories of power and categories of Hindu status (Barfield 1997:51).

Dumont (1980) argues that the introduction of the idea of structure is the major event of our times in the social anthropology and the essential problem for contemporary thought is to rediscover the meaning of the whole or systems, and structure provides the only logical form as yet available to this end. A structural analysis is concerned with the relationships, not substance-relationship parts, and between parts and totality. For Dumont, it follows that it is legitimate to include in the caste system only what we could call inter-caste relations, and not intra-caste relations. He is critical of contemporary anthropologists who "take the part of the whole" and who did not address sufficiently to inter-caste relations or to the total system. Dumont also criticizes anthropologists who have studied only one aspect of the system such as *jajmani* system or food transactions between castes.

For Dumont, the dominant principle of Hindu caste system is hierarchy – hierarchy, of course, of a religious, rather than of a political, sort. Other key principles are purity and impurity which is also religious, and interdependence by which parts are interrelated, and related to the whole. Thus, Dumont says ` the Indian caste system is not individualistic; it emphasizes its totality, not its individual members (Dumont 1980; Kolenda 1981).

Dumont seeks the idea that hierarchy in India (Hindus) is different from that in other parts of the world because of religious nature seems to be based on two ideas, that the Brahman priest is at the top, and that caste rank depends upon purity-impurity beliefs and practices.

The most important feature of the writings of Varna for Dumont's purpose is the superior status of the Brahman over the Kshatriya on the basis of the Brahman's monopoly over the offering of sacrifices. Brahman and Kshatriya are interdependent and superior to the other two Varnas. It is a matter of an absolute distinction between priesthood and royalty. The Brahman performs sacrifices and never rules; the Kshatriya rules, but never performs sacrifices. But the Kshatriya is dependent upon, and inferior to the Brahman. Dumont indicates that the disjunction, in the dominant India tradition, between priest and king is different from those societies in which the king is also a high priest (ancient Egypt, for example), as well as from those societies such as the modern West, in which the political is both completely secularized and absolutely autonomous from religion.

Dumont has associated the ends of man, spoken of in the ancient Hindu law books, the *Dharmasastras*, with the Varnas. There are three 'human ends', *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*, (duty, profit and pleasure). The analogy with the hierarchy of Varna is apparent: *dharma* corresponds to the Brahman or priest, *artha* to the King or Kshatriyas, the temporal power, and *kama*, to the others. Brahman counsellors who knows the *dharma* advice the king; it is the king's duty (*dharma*) to protect the people in exchange for grain payment. *Dharma* is defined by Dumont as 'the holistic idea of order'. This is to be seen in *jajmani* system which is oriented to the welfare of all (Dumont 1980:97).

Dumont rejects the idea that morphological similarities of ranked strata are enough to make other systems into caste systems. On these grounds he has argued that society in Sri Lanka is built upon 'quasi-caste rather than caste proper', since Brahmans have never been numerous in Sri Lanka and Buddhist concept of kinship rejects the Brahman-Kshatriya duality. Dumont is concerned essentially with the structure of value and not with the structure of interest (Béteille 1991:132). Anyone looking at Indian society today is likely to believe that their manner of behaviour is closer to the opposite. It can of course be argued that Dumont's observation apply to the traditional and not contemporary India (Béteille 1991:9).

POST-DUMONTIAN VIEWS OF HINDU CASTE

One theoretical school advocates an interpretative framework based upon 'coded bodily substance' concepts to analyse the Hindu caste system which is slightly different from proposed by Dumont. Taking issue with western dualism, McKim Marriott (1976) proposes an approach calls ethno-sociological, transactional, interactional, monist, non-dualist, and substance codes (or coded substance). He sees caste as the working out of a series of notions concerning bodily substances and inter-personal exchanges. Based on the study of "Konduru" village in the Andhra Pradesh, India, he introduces the "interactional" approach focusing on who is willing to accept food, water, and, so on from whom as a sign of relative status. Those of lower rank are supposedly willing to accept food from those of higher rank, but not vice versa.

The Brahman caste appear in no matrix as receivers any lower forms of substance-code, such as ordinary payment for services, wives from lower caste, or ordinary cooked food. Brahman typically accepts substance-code only of very perfect form, such as gift of land, money and grain. Brahman take the highest place through their own divinity, through their exclusive pessimal exchanges with still higher, more generous goods, and through their great gifts to other terrestrial men - cosmic knowledge in the form of substance-transformative ceremonies, teaching and advice (Marriott 1976 : 129).

Castes that follow some maximal tactics (maximal strategy) include Rajput and their allies. Among the allies of these groups maximise the forms of symmetrical exchange in land control, labour, or food distribution, and the maximizing the strategies of marriage, descent and diet to achieve the greatest quality and potency in substance, action, and group substance-code (Marriott 1976:125).

Those whose tactics include minimizing the number of relationship in which they exchange cooked food – are identifiable as skilled artisans. The minimizing transactional strategy is designated by the classical name Vaishya – those with productive power grow grain, rear cattle, and trade, supply their butter and pay taxes.

The groups with more "receiving" than "giving" relationship fall into two occupational categories: Barbers take food as well as bodily substance-codes directly from patrons of many castes; and the leather workers do the same (Marriott 1976 :128).

Perhaps the most important aspect of this theory is that it is easy to find out the caste ranking on the local level. However, eating the proper food symbolizes the religious purity or does it actually make a person pure? Knowledge is another important component and symbol of high status and sacredness, and is seen as partly independent of purity and pollution per se. This theory is unable to provide the answer of above questions.

Dumont's dualism, hierarchy and purity of caste as a religious phenomenon has been challenged by Gloria Godwin Raheja (1990) based on fieldwork in Pahansu, India, an Uttar Pradesh village dominated by landowning Gujars. The Gujar caste hold 98 percentage of all arable land in Pahansu and are hence, by virtue of economic strength, the dominant caste. Raheja suggests that castes are interrelated by three different orders which are actualized and emphasized to various degrees depending on the contexts. The 'hierarchical ordering' constituted by the principle of ritual purity, has the Brahman and the Bhangi (sweeper) as its extreme points (Raheja 1990: 3). This ordering corresponds to the traditional conception of caste rank.

Inter-caste relationship and Gujar dominance is however constituted primarily by 'prestations' made in and through *jajmani* relationship. *Jajmani* relationship entails an ordering of mutuality in which the members of the service castes receive a share in the harvests, "payment" for loyalty and service rendered to their Gujar patron (*jajman*). Although asymmetrical, and linked with power and economy, *jajmani* relations do not define a hierarchical order among castes.

The ritually most significant principle of ordering in Pahansu is the 'ordering of centrality'. In their roles as a "sacrificers" (*jajman*), it is right to Gujars to give *dan* and duty of "those who are others" mainly the members of other castes (including those who are hierarchically

superior) to accept (Raheja 1990: 88). Through *dan* prestation inauspiciousness is transferred from the giver to the receiver in non-reciprocal relations expressive of Gujar dominance.

Dan prestation are related to notions of the social world as a closed, circulatory system with regard to inauspiciousness. The luck and well-being of one means the misfortune and suffering of another: one man's meat is another man's poison.

The duty of caste members to accept *dan* from their Gujar jajmans, and thereby "digest" their sins, is a ritual expression of their subordination. In this respect all other castes than Gujars, Brahmans along with sweepers, carry out virtually identical ritual roles in relation to the jajmans. Raheja sees the dominant land-controlling caste at the centre of the jajmani system at the local level. Its "ritual centrality", rather than superior purity of Brahmans, makes the system operate. Raheja's study clearly demonstrates the multi-dimensionality of caste in Hindu society. Therefore, it can be said that Brahmans always do not possess high rank and purity, and such cases they are regarded as polluted and dependent. Whereas Dumont points out that Brahmans are always high and consider as pure. These two visions about Hindu caste clearly contradict to each other which clearly show that there is no uniformity about the concept of caste within Hindu value system. Raheja's view of centrality is nearer to the Marxist view of social class (who control the means of production are regarded as superior than that of other) rather than Hindu concept of purity and pollution.

In spite of the variation in their empirical reasoning, all three views follow in the direction of the essentialist paradigm where society is divided into a set of rigid, hierarchical groups bound together in an immutable bond, justified in terms of moral superiority of the clean caste to those considered unclean (Mitra 1994). The result as a 'nation state', in my view, remains ontologically and politically inaccessible to its own citizens, which then appears an injustice against the fellow citizen. By virtue of this situation, it generates enormous conflict, a constant threat to status quo. It is suppressed whenever possible, but the process of suppression is difficult and will never completely be effective.

COMPARATIVE THEORY OF CASTE

Western comparative social theorists have generally placed caste system not in a unique religious ideological or structural category but in matters of social differentiation and social stratification. Among the anthropologists studying caste in India, there exist different theoretical approaches, including those (Berreman 1967 and 1979 , Bailey 1957, Beteille 1965, et.al) who regard it as an extreme form of social stratification, comparable with other types of stratification and forms of inequality based on social classes, wealth or political party (power) (Hollup 1994: xx). This approach emphasizes that caste system is held together by power concentrated in certain group (the landholding and dominant caste), more than consensus.

Gerald D. Berreman (1967) argues that ‘as a social scientists and specifically as a social anthropologist unless we compare, we cannot talk of caste in South Asia outside Hindu - as Barth, for example, does when he describes caste in Swat - (Berreman 1967: 45). He wants to analyse what caste systems are, how they work, and what they do to people. When viewed comparatively and structurally, ‘caste system has customarily described as a system of stratification – rigid, birth-ascribed, permitting of no individual mobility, but nevertheless examples of ranked aggregates of people (ibid.:46).

Berreman wants to suggest a more comprehensive approach which makes for cross-cultural comparability without sacrificing cultural content and facts are to be understood largely in terms of distinctive patterns of social integration. Accordingly, ‘a caste system occurs where a society is made up of birth-ascribed groups which are hierarchically ordered and culturally distinct. The hierarchy entails differential evaluation, rewards, and association (Berreman 1967: 48)’.

The most striking similarities among caste systems are the social relation–patterns of interaction. There are numerous rules and restrictions on marriage, on sex relations, on living together, on eating together, on sitting together, and on a variety of other forms of interaction symbolic of social inequality (Berreman 1967: 64).

Berremman argues that caste system is applicable anywhere outside of Hindu India, and it can be usefully applied to societies with system of hierarchical endogamous sub divisions where membership is hereditary and permanent, wherever they occur (Berremman1979: 13). He further says that the literature on caste in India, the race in America, on the Burakumin in Japan, on specific societies such as Rwanda reported by Maquet, and South Africa reported by van de Berghe provide a starting place of a comparative study of caste.

Jacques J. Maquet (1970) has described the tri-partite system, comparing three different groups among the Rwanda people: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. The immediately noticeable differences among these groups occur in their activities, their social statuses, and their physical types (Maquet 1970:95). And to be a Tutsi, a Hutu or a Twa gave an individual a different status in society. Birth ascribed social status and occupation, marriage endogamy, food transaction rules are very near the extreme seclusion of the model of a caste. This is why it can be said that Rwanda strata are more on the side of caste than class.

In a study of the Pathan of Swat, North Pakistan, Fredrik Barth (1981) describes the system of social stratification and claims that "if the concept of caste is to be useful in sociological analysis its definition must be based on structural criteria and not on particular features of the Hindu philosophical scheme (Barth 1981:53)". He takes caste as a system of social stratification, and concludes that "the principle of status summation seems to be the structural feature which most clearly characterizes caste as a system of social stratification (ibid.)".

There are no Hindus in this remote valley of the High Indus. The population is divided into various qoum which strongly resemble Hindu castes. Following the basic characteristics of Indian caste system, Barth postulated the patron-client relationship as the basis of caste system. According to Barth, the Pathans' system of patronage and Hindu *jajmani* system are similar, where the lower status groups pay service to upper groups. Each qoum are ranked by status, and high portions of the marriage are endogamous. In Swat, as in Hindu societies, the notion that pollution derives from body processes marks off certain castes as occupationally polluted. The indigenous polluted

castes include Washerman, Sieve-makers and Dancers (Barth 1981:46-7) who are similar to (Pode in Newars), Sarkis and Badis of Hindu caste in Nepal respectively.

Caste, in Barth's essay, is analysed not as a set of ritual group, but as a pattern of social stratification. Caste systems are considered to be characterized by the relatively high degree of congruence that obtains between the various status frameworks found in the community, with their hierarchies, and the hierarchy of caste categories (Barth 1981:35). He further argues the model for social identities should be composed of the salient features of the life circumstances for different caste at different times.

In the study of Fredrik Barth (1993), about Bali-Hindu people in Indonesia where the 'basic division of population is that of caste' (Barth 1993:31), provides a different picture from Hindu caste in Nepal and India. On the one hand, people are divided on the basis of *Warna* (Sanskrit- Varna) system, and on the other hand, caste is not a very salient feature of their everyday lives and contemporary social relations. Many aspects of caste behaviour are no longer observed (Barth 1993:233). Level of seating and head elevation are no longer respected by the general public, even in the context of formal ritual. Endogamy is disappearing, so that even high caste girls are increasingly marrying down, and wealth and modern education are far more significant assets than high birth (ibid.). He further says 'caste in North Bali exhibits a confusing feature (Barth 1993: 235) which provides similar problem about purity and pollution. These two brilliant studies of Barth provide the clear picture that on the one hand, there are much more similarities of Hindu caste in non-Hindu area (Swat), while on the other hand, there are Hindus (Bali) without traditional types of castes or Varna rights and duties.

The Marxist approach to the study of caste has been applied with successful results in India. André Beteille's (1965; 1991) important study in India has introduced a new system in which lower castes have some political and economic power. According to Beteille 'the caste system is clearly a hierarchical system, although the nature of this hierarchy may be difficult to ascertain beyond certain broad terms.

Landowners, tenants and agricultural labourers (of the same caste) also constitute a hierarchy (Béteille 1965:4). In the past, the division of village was dominated not only rituals, but also economic and political life. Today, there are many areas of life which are becoming progressively "caste free" (ibid.5). Thus, landownership, occupation, and even education are not to some extent dependent upon caste (ibid: 5). Today the education system is far more open both in principle and practice. Education not only enables to compete on more equal terms with the Brahmans for white-collar jobs, but also provides them with more equal chances of political participation. In the town and cities, white-collar jobs are relatively caste free (ibid.).

CASTE SYSTEM IN NEPAL: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

It is difficult to trace the origin of the Varna system in Nepal. However, the genesis of Varna system in Nepal can be traced more accurately from the reign of King Jayasthiti Malla in the contest of Kathmandu Valley and with the introduction of the *Muluki Ain* (Old Legal Code) of 1854 in the context of Nepal as a whole. Jayasthiti Malla classified the population of Kathmandu Valley into 64 caste groups, each with different functional and occupational categories. There had been little change in traditional caste structure until 1854 (Sharma 1977). *Muluki Ain* is a document of great historical, legal and cultural interests for scholars on Nepal, by which all people in Nepal, high and low, were supposed to have been judged (Sharma 2004). This *Muluki Ain* divided Nepali people into the four main hierarchies (Hofer 2004). They were:

Tagadhari (castes wearing sacred thread): Upadhaya Brahmin, Rajput, Thakuri, Jaisi Brahmin, Chhetri, Dew Bhaju (Newar Brahmin), Indian Brahmin, Sanyasi, Lower Jaisi and various Newar castes who wear holy cord (*janai*) were included in this group.

Matawali (Alcohol-drinking castes): *Matawalis* were further categorized into two subgroups – ‘non-enslavable alcohol drinkers or *namasinya matawali*’ and ‘enslavable alcohol drinkers or *masinya matawali*’. Magar, Gurung, Sunuwar, for example, were included in *namasinya matawali*, and Bhote, Chepang, Kumal, Hayu, Tharu, Gharti were included in *masinya matawali*.

Pani nachalne chhoi chitto halnunaparne (Impure but touchable castes): Kasai (Newar butchers), Kusle (Newar musicians), Hindu Dhobi (Newar washerman), Kulu (Newar tanners), Musalman, and Mleccha were included in this category.

Pani nachalne chhoi chitto halnu parne (untouchable castes): Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (tanners, shoemakers), Kandara (stemming from unions between Kami and Sarki), Damai (tailors and musicians), Gaine (minstrels), Badi (Musicians), Poda (Newar skinnners and fisherman), Chyame (Newar scavengers) were included in this category.

The above hierarchy of the principal social categories in the Code had been determined from the order in which they were found mention in connection with laws that lay down punishment for different castes for committing incest and copulation with lower or higher castes (Sharma 1977). The Code recognized that Brahmins were neither supposed to sentence capital punishment nor supposed to resort to killing their wife's seducer, if they were cuckolded. But in the laws regarding capital punishment and cuckold's right to kill his wife's paramour, Thakuri and Chhetri were treated differently. The children of Brahman fathers and Chhetri mothers were classified as Khatri or Khatri-Chertis and their status was labelled to that of pure Chhetris.

The hierarchical position occupied by most of the higher castes was inferred from their consecutive enumeration but the castes of the intermediate group (*Matawali*) were made within their caste category. The highest caste among the impure caste was Kasai, followed by Kusle, Hindu Dhobi, Kulu, Kami, Sarki, Kandara, Damai, Gaine, Badi and Poda. The lowest caste of all was Chayme. It was said that the Chaymes, the scavengers, in the past time were renowned for collecting and eating the food leftovers of other castes.

The social values preached by the Muluki Ain, however, were providing restrictive, anachronic and out of step with the spirit of times. These values were seen as a potent instrument of Rana political repression. After the Rana regime, caste rules relating to food, drink and inter-caste marriage were openly flouted but the Muluki Ain had not been abrogated (Sharma 2004). In 1963, Legal Code was replaced by New

Legal Code. The legal recognition to caste and all the discriminatory laws made on the grounds of caste were ceased. However, the legacy of caste shifted from public to private domain.

QUESTIONS OF DIVISION OF LABOUR

The discrepancy between the traditional *Varna* model and the hierarchy of the *Muluki Ain* becomes clearly visible. Apart from the privileged functions of the Brahmins as spiritual teachers and priests, the *Muluki Ain* does not make the pursuit of a handicraft, trade or agriculture dependent on one's caste affiliation (Hofer 2004). Quoting *Muluki Ain* Hofer (2004: 92), for example, writes, "Occupation is not governed by caste membership. All four *Varna* and 36 *Jat* are allowed to sharpen tools, to sew shoes and clothes, to work in mines, to wash gold, to fire brick-kilns, to pursue the potter's trade, to prepare leather for the *madal* drums and to pursue all other works as an occupation, to work in commerce, thus earning their living; nobody is deprived of his caste status". This passage is all the more remarkable as here some occupations are enumerated which are pursued by impure castes, such as leather work, tanning and trade of blacksmith (Hofer 2004).

Anthropologists have found that there is no restriction on occupational co-operation in agriculture and commerce. At harvest and planting time higher *jat/jatis* Hindus work side by side with 'untouchable' labourers, and persons of any *jat* avail themselves of the services of 'untouchable' like Kami, Damai, and Sarki (Furer-Haimendorf 1966: 22). Many groups have agriculture as their traditional occupation and follow similar dietary and other customs. Yet these groups may also claim to be higher than one another. In such cases, other factors assist to rank them. Landownership and wealth it brings, education and hereditary position of authority are attributes that influence the assessment of rank and at the same time make it possible for others to distinguish ranks when dealing with two different groups claiming equal status. Thus the different economic and political status of the same *jat/jatis* in different areas account for variations in its hierarchical status. The number of Brahmins who maintain themselves mainly by priestly work is small, and many of the Nepalese Brahmins are cultivators living in the villages and in a style hardly distinguishable

from that of other cultivators (Furer-Haimendorf 1966: 19). High status in the caste is by no means always correlated with a high economic status, and many Brahman peasants are no wealthier than their Chhetri, Newar or even Magar or Tamang neighbours.

With the increasing impact of modernization, western secular education, industrialization and economic prosperity, there has been a tendency of increased secularization of life. To most Hindus, religious practices (worship and prayers) do not appear as an important part of their daily social life. In an analysis of social change in Hill village of Nepal, Macfarlane (1976) writes ‘... much of the former work of the Blacksmith, Tailors and Cobblers is no longer necessary because of growing markets for chief tools and clothes (Marfarlane 1976:139). This situation clearly shows the decline in *jajmani* system which is a key feature of Hindu caste system.

Economic and political developments have pressed the caste system to break its stagnancy and status quo. New divisions and differentiations have been giving rise to new antagonism and social norms. In the urban setting, working class people who have to live by selling by their labour power. Such social mobility has broken traditional caste barriers. In the rural setting, the traditional subsistence agriculture system and age-old caste structure have substantially changed, and the relationship is being established based on wage labour on land.

CONCLUSION

A widely applied and frequently contested model for system of birth-ascribed rank is that of ‘caste’, deriving from the example of Hindu Philosophy. If one requires a specifically Hindu rationale of purity and pollution and/or endogamy and strict universal occupational specialization, the one restrict caste to only regions and groups where the society is based on traditional Hindu value system and which is very hard to get similar situation and position within the Hindu world. The rules that define purity and impurity, varies certain regional and historical setting which create fundamental problem to define the caste within this narrow sense. If one concedes that caste can be defined cross-culturally (beyond Hindu) and, if one agrees that a caste system

is one in which a society is made up of birth-ascribed groups which are hierarchically ordered, culturally distinct, and wherein the hierarchy entails differential evaluation, rewards, and association, whether one use the term 'caste' or prefers 'ethnic stratification', or some other term is simply a matter of lexical preference. Caste, Varna or Jati in Hindu (especially in Nepal and India) and equivalent but non-Hindu qoum organization in Swat and Muslim areas, are each unique, yet both share the criteria by which many anthropologists have defined caste, as the tri-partite system of Rwanda and the essentially dual system of United States, and all share in addition a wide variety of social and personal concomitants. An advantage of a comparative approach to the study of caste is that variety as well consistency in their characteristics can be defined and studied and the consequence can be analysed.

Caste-based hierarchy in Nepal affects the people by constraining them to accept lower positions and conditions of work embedded with oppression and exploitation. On the other hand, caste based discrimination, be it state or private level, provide a ground for various movements to emancipate the oppressed. Caste is not today what it was before 1950; and it has not become completely class or replica of it. It is also true that a dominant caste has not necessarily a part of the dominant class.

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