

# ETHNICITY IN A SOUTH INDIAN VILLAGE

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## 1. Theoretical Framework:

### 1.1 Ethnicity: "A group of people with:

- a real or putative common ancestry,
- memories of a shared history, and
- focus on one or more symbols of their common identity as 'a people'."

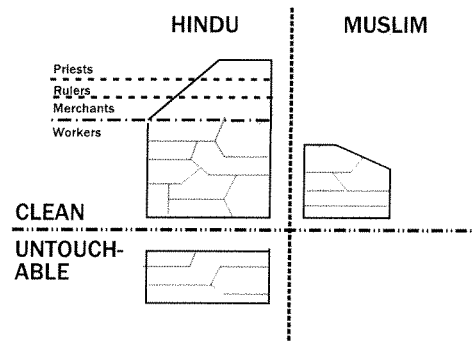
### 1.2 Types of Ethnic Groups:

- tribe
- multi-tribal society
- multi-ethnic society
- caste society

## 2. Ethnicity in a South Indian Village:

### 2.1 Characteristics of Castes:

- membership is by birth.
- they are endogamous.
- they have distinct symbols of identity:
  - name, religious beliefs, rituals, scriptures, dress, food, customs.
- internal governance.
- social position: occupation, location of residence.



### 2.2 The Caste System:

- exclusive membership.
- exhaustive membership.
- groups are closed.
- membership is by ascribed by birth.
- groups are ranked on the basis of purity/pollution.
- relations between groups are regulated by the caste system.
- relationships are complimentary, not competitive [society is like a body].

### 2.3 Purity and Pollution:

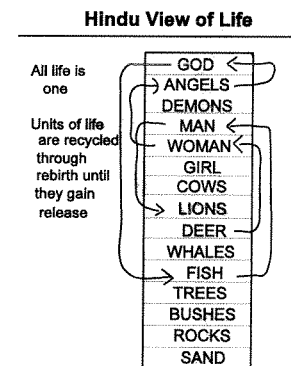
- occupations: priest, ruler, merchant, workers, untouchables.
- food: vegetarian, vegetables + fish, + fowl, +mutton, +pork. Dead cows.

### 2.4 Hierarchy of Life based on Purity and Pollution:

- human caste system.
- hierarchy of all life.

### 2.5 Inter-caste Relationships:

- hierarchy: language, touch, inter-dining, location of residence.
- complementarity: economic [patron - client, *jajamani*]; religion [rituals, doctrines].



## 2. Attributional Theory:

- 2.1 Many behavioral practices are ranked according to a scale of purity and status. For example: vegetarianism ranks high, eating fish and fowl as middle, and eating beef as low. Secluding women is high, not doing so is low. Refusing to remarry widows is high, widow remarriage is low. Worshiping the high Hindu gods is high, worshiping the local goddesses is low.
- 2.2 The status of a caste depends on a combination of its behavior practices.
- 2.3 Mobility occurs through "Sanskritization"--dropping the low attributes and adopting the high ones.
- 2.4 Assumes that all castes can be ranked along a single scale, and that people in one caste are all higher than those in the caste below them.
- 2.5 The *dalits* or untouchables are at the bottom because they eat beef and do defiling work.
- 2.6 Problems with this model:
- it assumes that everyone in one caste is above everyone in the caste below.
  - it has little place for the *panchala* or left hand castes, tribals and transient castes.
  - it's hierarchy is based primarily on religious notions of purity and pollution. Individual achievement has no place in it.

## 3. Inter-actional or Transactional Theory:

- 3.1 It is the on-going calculus of giving-receiving transactions that determine a caste's rank. In relations between humans, and between humans and gods, the giver is higher, and the receiver is lower. If a low caste can get Brahmins to marry their children, they rise in rank. The cost to them is giving much money and food.
- 3.2 The transaction is an exchange. What A receives materially from B he pays for symbolically in status rank and recognition. B's symbolic dominance of A requires him not only to refuse to accept from A, but to get A to accept from him, and he may have to make it worth A's while materially to make him accept the gift. An example is dowry.
- 3.3 Problems with this model:
- it works only with caste as the primary form of hierarchy. It overlooks the place of 'class' in the social hierarchy.

4. Transactional Caste/Class Theory:

- 4.1 Accepts the transactional model, but adds class as another major dimension of social hierarchy. Religious factors are tempered by economic, social and political ones.
- 4.2 Sees caste and personal rank as only roughly coordinated.

### III. DYNAMICS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

We need to look at the nature and dynamics of the caste system.

#### 1. Definitions of *jati*:

At the core of the terms 'caste,' 'tribe,' and 'community' in South Asian languages is the notion of an **ethnic group**: a social group based on the concept of kinship ties or 'blood.' These are associated with distinctive cultural traits. There are thousands of such groups in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, hundreds in Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. The most common terms for them are *jati* and *quom*. We must not confuse *jatis* with *varnas* (four religious divisions of society).

Castes are ethnic groups in systems of interaction with other ethnic groups. The fact and processes of interaction tend to accentuate or minimize the differences between them, depending upon the dynamics of the local situation. For example, Brahmin castes compete with one another, but join to confront the Vaishyas. But high castes join to oppose the untouchables.

Not all ethnic groups in South Asia have become castes integrated into a caste system. Unassimilated tribes exist in the mountainous areas of North India, Burma, Afghanistan and Nepal. Increasingly these are being assimilated into the neighboring caste systems through trade and communication.

Most areas of South Asia have well developed caste systems, including not only the Hindu communities, but Muslim, Buddhist and Christian communities as well. Hinduism validates the caste system by giving it religious significance and moral legitimacy not given it in the other great religions.

In cities and towns surface characteristics of caste die out, but the deeper structure remains strong. Marriage, food taboos, and ethnic boundaries remain high.

#### 2. Characteristics of castes (*jatis*) in South Asia:

2.1 Membership is by birth. Membership by adoption is rare. These groups are genealogical based groupings.

2.2 Endogamy: marriage is within the group.

2.3 Internal structure or system of endogamous groups: clans, gotras, etc. There is a wide variety of types and names for them.

2.4 Distinct name of its own, often combined with a name held in common by several groups: e.g.: Chitpavan Brahmins, Vaghela Rajputs, etc.

2.5 Tradition of common origin and ancestry, nearly always mythological rather than historical. Also various accounts of the history of the group.

2.6 Territory: all the groups have traditional homelands and an actual territory of occupation. These vary considerably in size but rarely cross linguistic boundaries.

2.7 Language: each group has a single traditional mother tongue, though members may also speak other languages. Other groups have their own distinctive dialect features within the language.

2.8 Typical occupations or forms of livelihood. these may include a wide range of occupations or be quite specialized such as washerman, barber, rock smith, iron smith, etc.

2.9 Government: varies widely in strength and structure. Among some upper class urban groups the traditional internal governing councils (*panchayats*) have virtually disappeared. In many other cases they have been supplemented by state- or nation-wide associations which serve more to lobby for the group's interests than to govern it internally.

- 2.10 Religion: normally each caste is either Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Sikh, etc. If some members convert to a different religion, this normally leads to the formation of two separate endogamous ethnic groups. Hindu caste normally have their own lineage and patron deities, often have distinctive forms of the great gods, styles of worship and propitiation, religious stories, and festivals. Many have their own religious specialists, shrines or temples.
- 2.11 Most castes have distinctive rules and customs governing marriage and divorce, descent, inheritance and succession. These affect all other aspects of internal structure. The strong conservatism in this area of life (compared with occupation, territory, government, etc.) is a major factor keeping the groups separate and different from each other.
- 2.12. Distinctive forms of important life-cycle ceremonies (especially marriage) and domestic rituals.
- 2.13 Distinctive diet or set of dietary rules.
- 2.14 Distinctive forms of dress, at least in minor items such as type of jewelry, cut of mustache or beard, form of headgear.

### 3. The Caste System:

The caste system is not simply the gathering of different castes into the same area, it is the system of relationships that develop between them based on the principles of differentiation, hierarchy, and ritualized interaction. It is a system that can incorporate any number of new castes into the **system** without any difficulty.

#### 3.1 **Accentuation and institutionalization of differences.**

The system is based on ethnic identities, and groups tend to accentuate any traits peculiar to themselves and to symbolize these by their dress, ornaments, headgear and other visible symbols. At a deeper level there is the hierarchy of food (vegetarian to eating of different kinds of meat including cows); and restrictions on food exchange (lower can eat food offered by higher caste persons, but not vice versa). It is important on first meeting to determine the relative rank and ethnic identity of others one meets.

#### 3.2 **Specialization and interdependence consciously acted out in economic and ceremonial life.**

Generally speaking, the more specialized caste roles are, the more the interdependence of castes in a community.

- 3.21 Economic: most castes have traditional occupations, and these often give the castes their names: farmer, trader, flower-grower, weaver-of-fine-cloth, etc. Today, due to modernity and the introduction of new trades (e.g.. aluminum ware, factory woven cloth) many caste members do not engage in their traditional occupations. The traditional occupation is a monopoly and no one else can engage in it.

Agriculture, however, is not a caste monopoly, but a joint effort of different castes with their specializations to produce the crop needed to keep them all alive. Farming is open to any one and supports a great many people. Agricultural activities are nonmonitized. One does not pay for them in cash, but in harvest grain because this is the basis of life. Monitized activities are secondary, and not essential to the maintenance of life itself.

- 3.2 Ceremonial: Many castes have specialized economic and ceremonial roles in the village. For example, the barber is also the village surgeon, tooth-extractor, message-spreader, town crier, and marriage broker. His knife is used to cut umbilical cords at birth. He also carries the idols on palanquins during village religious processions.

All traditional castes have specific roles, obligations and prerogatives in the rituals of the village. All must participate to make the village rites successful in pleasing the gods and generating prosperity.

**3.3 Power relations.** The power relations that bind the various ethnic groups in a village into a caste system are not normally relations between castes as such. They are cross-caste alignments between individuals and families.

There are several types of patron-client systems binding individuals and families together. The central one has to do with landlord-tenant in agriculture: the *jajman* (food-grower) and *kamin* or *yejman* (workers). These relations tend to be regularized, to persist over time and to be inherited from generation to generation. They are typically multiplex: they are many-stranded relationships, with personal, moral, psychological and religious dimensions as well as economic and power components. They are complexes of reciprocal rights and obligations which both members try to manipulate: the subordinate tries to get as much security and material benefit for the prestige and power he gives up as he can, the dominant person tries to work it the other way, and through dominating many such relationships, win power and prestige in the village. Other patron-client relationships behind creditors to debtors, and employers to employees.

One measure of power is physical force, the number of men a man can mobilize by activating kin and patron-client relationships to defend his interests. Sometimes it matters less that his cause is just than that he can mobilize enough muscle-power to enforce it.

Throughout South Asian history, power has often been regarded as self-justifying. Anyone who can grab power has been accepted as having power if he can hang on to it long enough. It comes to be regarded as legitimate. A man's power and wealth are recognized and accepted by others so long as he has them.

The concept of 'limited good'--limited wealth, limited power, limited friends--is common in many villages. So one person's advance is seen as coming from the losses of others. So those who work to get ahead are often beaten down by others.

**3.4 Hierarchy.** Hierarchy is the major principle for structuring the social order in South Asia. Hierarchy has to do with the symbolic moral order rather than the day-to-day fluctuations of material fortunes. This order is expressed in terms of **purity** and **pollution**--honor and dishonor, clean and unclean.

Much of social behavior is invested in symbolic transactions of this sort including forms of worship, patterns of friendship, symbols of deference, inter-dining, smoking, food and service exchanges, and patron-client relationships. The basic relationship involved in symbolic hierarchy is transactional: giving and receiving. The Giver is higher and the Receiver is lower. The higher can also command the lower. There are many kinds of giving and receiving: food, gifts, handling body waste, etc. In a sense the caste system is a great garbage disposal system that seeks to keep priests pure so that they can speak to the gods and so guarantee the well being of the community.

Caste ranking is sometimes called "ritual" or "ceremonial" ranking because it is invested with moral significance and is acted out with special clarity and detail in social and religious ceremonies, such as large weddings and village-wide festivals. But "clarity" is only relative, for in any village there are areas of vagueness and disputes over the rank of each caste. The closer two castes are in rank, the more disagreements there are likely to be on which one outranks the other. This is seen in two types of transaction:

1) disputes: where caste vie for rank neither will accept or be able to give to the other, so their relative position is hard to determine.

2) reciprocity: there are groups of castes that both give and receive from one another.

These belong to the same ranking block, and are often allies in other respects as well. Such blocks are often near the middle of the hierarchy, and may contain a half dozen or more castes, one of which is large.

For any individual, the picture is simpler. All he/she has to know is whom he receives from, whom he both receives from and gives to, whom he does neither with, and whom he only gives to: a total of four ranking transaction.

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## XI. CHRISTIANITY AND CASTE

There has been much debate about a Christian response to caste. Behind this are several fundamental questions.

### 1. Caste is a Social System:

#### 1.1 Its nature as a social system:

- exclusive membership: each person belongs to only one group.
- exhaustive membership: every person belongs to a group.
- groups are ranked: based on purity and pollution.
- groups are closed: entered by ascription through birth, and gotten from one's parents.
- relationships between groups are defined by the caste system that regulates roles and relationships between castes.
- relationships in the caste system are based on complementarity, rather than competition.
- the caste system has been very stable over long periods of time, and so provides security and makes life possible in difficult circumstances.

#### 1.2 Its effect on Christianity:

- prevents individuals from converting due to social pressures.
- converts have no communities, and so often have no corporate identities.
- western missionaries are usually individualistically oriented, and call for personal conversions. They often misunderstand the dynamic of group conversions in corporate oriented societies.

### 2. Caste as a Religious System:

#### 2.1 Nature:

- Caste is based on the Hindu concept of purity and pollution.
- Caste is based on the Hindu concept of hierarchy, and the intrinsic inequality of humans.
- If caste dies, Hinduism [*sanatana dharma*] dies (Gandhi).

#### 2.2 Its effect on Christianity:

- converts are often forced to worship family and caste gods, and take part in household rites and Hindu festivals, even though they have the right to worship their own personal god.
- converts perpetuate caste and concepts of religious pollution and hierarchy in the church.
- castes divide churches, and now divide denominations.

### 3. Christian Responses to the Caste System:

#### 3.1 Reject caste:

- short run: conversion largely among low castes—high caste stay away. Long run: the



- upward mobility of low caste converts leads to conversions among the high castes.
- difficulty to get individual converts, so encourage multi-individual conversions in castes.
- stress the Christians as a new community or *jati* in the Spirit, breaking down all caste barriers.

### 3.2 Acceptance of caste:

- short run: probably more high caste converts, possibly fewer untouchable converts.
- caste becomes a part of the church, and undermines the fundamental message of the Gospel of the unity of the body of Christ, and the breaking down of the walls that divide humans on earth.
- post-conversion teaching to reject caste has been largely ineffective.

## 4. Modernity and Caste:

- 4.1 Modernity is beginning to undermine the caste system in the public sphere, but little in the private spheres of life, such as marriages and religious rituals.
- 4.2 Modernity and secularism are freeing people to convert more freely, but this also means that nominal Christians are leaving the church.

## IV. ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

### 1. Types of Economic Systems:

There are three basic economic systems in human societies: gifts, redistribution and market. All three are found in tradition Indian society and in American society, but their importance and relationships between them differ in significant ways.

#### **1.1 Gifts:**

Gifts are economic exchanges in which the primary function is social, not economic. They are generally reciprocal, and reflect the nature of the relationship being built. Examples are sacrifices, offerings, and presents.

Example of gifts in village life are:

- offerings and sacrifices to the gods
- gifts to government officials
- gifts at weddings
- innam or gift lands of the temple and mosque

#### **1.2 Redistribution:**

Economic redistribution involves the gathering of resources by some center and the disbursement of these to members of the community according to need. Examples of this are taxes, insurance, and benevolent funds.

Patron-client systems are economic systems in which one person is the patron, and others are clients. This is a vertical relationship in which the purpose is not market gain but socioeconomic stability. This is the basis for *jajamani*, and *begari* systems in village life.

#### Understanding Rights and Obligations of Patron and Client

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##### PATRON

- responsible for the wellbeing of the client
- give food, gifts, clothing, 'loans' and assistance at festivals, weddings, funerals
- gain honor, power and status

##### CLIENT

- responsible for loyal service to of the patron
  - give honor-praise and work to patron
  - gain socioeconomic security
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Examples of redistribution in village life are:

- jajmani system [traditional patron-client system applied to farmer]
- begari system [traditional patron-client system applied to village]
- modern taxes and redistribution
- modern insurance

#### **1.3 Market:**

Market economy is the exchange of goods and services for economic purposes. It takes place between autonomous entities in the form of contracts in which each party expects to gain something.

Examples of market in village life are:

- village shops and markets
- modern factories
- modern banking services

2. Innam System:

3. Jajmani System:

4. Begari System: