Caste in a Foreign Land : Changing Aspects of an Indian Cultural Institution in the Caribbean

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Religion has always been the core of Indian culture. For the Indians who emigrated to distant lands, religion was the means to organize and orient their lives. The Indian enclaves of the Caribbean were the reservoirs of the traditional cultural institutions of India. However, these institutions came in close contact with the British and Dutch institutions on one hand, and the alien cultures of the people of African origin on the other. The plantation life, its hardships and a hostile environment changed the very nature of religious practices among the Indian migrants. Though religion continued to have a far-reaching influence among their descendants, its nature, form and content has undergone remarkable changes.

There is a close relation between Hinduism and the caste system. The notions of purity and pollution is central to the social relations between groups and individuals (Dumont 1971). But over time, the key notion of "purity" underlying both religion and society become a mere sentiment among the Indian migrants (Van der Burg and Van der Veer 1986:516). The disappearance of caste boundaries implies the integration of a group with a common Hindu identity. The so-called lower castes abandoned their distinctive practices, gave up animal sacrifice and discarded the entire gamut of spirit possession and demon invocation to come under the banner of the "higher caste cult" of the Sanatan Dharma (Jayawardena 1966:227-28). Brahmanical ideas came to dominate and the so-called low caste religious activities were marginalised (Cors Van der Burg and Van der Veer 1986). This led to the dwindling of the so-called low caste sects in Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam. Thus, a process of Sanskritization was in progress in the Caribbean which resulted in a religious universalization that cut across geographical, linguistic and caste differences.

This paper is divided into two main sections. The first section is concerned with the analysis of caste, covering the aspects of pollution and hierarchy. The second section deals with the aspects of commensality, endogamy and occupation. It must be noted that this paper explores caste as an aspect of a cultural institution in the Caribbean amongst overseas Indians, especially with respect to circa 1940-1970 and thus presents a historical account within an anthropological perspective.

Caste Pollution and Hierarchy :- Caste is one of the institutions which has been unable to withstand the pressures of the multiracial society of the Caribbean. Van der Veer and Vertovec (1991: 155) are of the view that the absence of state policies that emphasized caste went a long way in diminishing its credibility among the overseas Indians in the Caribbean. This is in complete contrast to what was witnessed in British India where colonialists categorized and listed various castes in order to smoothen their own administrative responsibilities.

The Indian immigrants in the Caribbean came from a wide variety of caste groups at different levels of the Indian caste hierarchy. By 1940, the Indians in the Guyanese society had nearly ceased to consider caste as an important criterion for the evaluation of social status and esteem. The aspects of income, occupation, education, race and the standard of living gradually became more relevant in assessing the social status of an individual. Even when high caste individuals performed certain sacred ceremonies, they abstained from publicizing their high ritual

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status because performance and not caste determined the social prestige of the Indians in the multiethnic society of Guyana. Only those Brahmins who lead a respectable life were accorded the honorific title of "Maharaj." At the same time, non-Brahmins who were vegetarian and lead a pious life were also awarded the traditional respect due to a Brahmin (Smith and Jayawardena 1967:61). Niehoff (1967:153), in his study in Trinidad, maintains that the Indians had a vague awareness of the hierarchical order of various caste groups, and the main castes were placed in a certain order of their social prestige. This hierarchy was not rigid in nature as caste ideas were not explicit enough to establish unanimity about gradations. Distinctions were focused mainly on the high and so-called low castes while the ranking of middle castes remained ambiguous. There still existed a feeling among the Hindus that Brahmins were somewhat special and the term "panditji" was used frequently to refer to Brahmins (Niehoff 1967:155). On the other hand, members of the so-called low castes still carried some of the stigma of their traditional position. Clarke (1967 :196), is of the view that caste as a determinant of social status affected only those Indians who were located at the "extremities of the caste scale" and those "who aspire to religious and political leadership in the community."

In the Indian community of Surinam, caste as the basis for social hierarchy carried very little weight. Speckman (1967:209) is of the opinion that distinctions were made between Brahmins and the so-called Untouchable castes till about 1940. But after this period, as the Indians were drawn into the social system of the Surinamese society, the significance of the internal stratification system decreased. Brahmins and Kshatriyas continued to remark with pride on their caste identities and maintained a distance with regard to members of the low castes. However, status differentiation had increasingly come to be based on education, profession, economic position and political influence. A fundamental feature of the Indian caste system is the notion of pollution, and the relation between pure and impure. But Smith and Jayawardena (1967:61) hold that in Guyana, the notion of pollution was restricted and apart from a few exceptions, it no longer served to classify castes. Activities traditionally regarded as impure no longer lead to the loss of class prestige.

As far as the Indian society in Trinidad was concerned, Schwartz (1967:122) is of the view that pollution practices were not very rigid and that a great many of the insulative and isolative aspects of caste had decreased in importance. Clarke (1967:156:59) supports this line of argument and maintains that there was a dilution of the concepts of purity and pollution as Untouchability had disappeared. However, Niehoff (1967:156-159) presents a conflicting view when he reports that aspects of purity and pollution were practiced by Indians in Trinidad. Food taboos regarding the non-consumption of beef and pork, the practice of touch pollution and restricted residence of lower caste were some of the customs which still prevailed.

Commensality, Endogamy and Occupation :- Caste rules regulating commensality were violated right from the time when the emigrants ate with others on board ship or ate food cooked or served by others on their way to the Caribbean from India (Jayaram 2006: 149). In Guyana, there were no restrictions on commensality on public occasions, although sometimes restrictions did operate in private. Smith and Jayawardena (1967:62) maintain that on public occasions such as weddings and religious ceremonies, guests ate together, but for private dinners, high caste families often expressed reluctance to entertain people of so-called low castes. Brahmin priests, after performing ritual ceremonies, often ate at the homes of so-called low caste clients. This was a reversal of the orthodox caste practice where the high castes offered food to others but refrained from accepting it. Among the Indians of Trinidad, though commensality was the norm, Clarke (1967:192) reports about some restricted commensality as an exception rather than the rule.

The Indian community in Guyana practiced exogamy more often than not. There were no prohibitions regarding inter-caste marriage, and children were ascribed their father's caste. Income

and education were often balanced against caste considerations when a spouse was chosen. At times, these factors would override the principle of caste as revealed in the examples of Brahmin youth making economically advantageous marriages with low caste girls (Smith and Jayawardena 1967:64). Schwartz's (1967:130) survey in Trinidad shows that the highest incidence of endogamy was found among the so-called low caste groups. He explained this trend on the basis of their association with the basic subsistence pursuits and their low position in the economic hierarchy. Niehoff (1967:160-161) maintains that caste endogamy was on its way out. Though families tried to avoid marriages between widely separated castes, instances of alliances between Brahmins and the so-called low castes had been reported. Clarke (1967:189) shows that caste endogamy was practiced by only half of his informants, most of whom belonged to the two highest varnas. Caste pride and parental control over marriage were reasons attributed for this. Caste values had become more relevant in the case of varna endogamy. Clarke argues that caste endogamy was slowly being replaced by varna and class endogamy. Speckman (1967:210) found that caste was not an important criterion in mate selection in Surinam. The significance of varna was also on the decline. The Brahmins and Kshatriyas attached some importance to varna categories but this aspect was often confused with other considerations like financial position, education and profession of the spouses.

In Trinidad, among the Indian, marriage partners were selected on the basis of class, status and religion (Nevadomsky 1983:197). Caste considerations were not important. Though Klass (1961:122) remarks that preference for town and village exogamy were shown. While Indian marriages before 1940 were said to have been arranged, in the later decades, marriages were contracted on the basis of personal choice. But Smith and Jayawardena (1958:179) report of instances where even Brahmins married off their daughters to wealthy or professional so-called low caste persons. Thus, education and occupation of a prospective husband were probably his most important attributes. Marriage by choice had replaced the pattern of arranged marriages. Ideally, Indians adhered to the rules of local exogamy while contracting marriage but because of the factor of personal choice, local endogamy was quite common. Speckmann's (1965:65) extensive field work in Surinam, reveals that caste endogamy no longer existed among the Indians there.

Among the Indians in the Caribbean, one also noticed a dissociation of occupation from caste and the disappearance of occupational segregation and specialization along caste lines. Workers of different caste backgrounds had similar occupations and were paid the same wages. This led to the breakdown of the jajmani system, which bound certain castes in patron-client relationships. Thus, caste was functionally a matter of only a little concern in the Indian communities of the Caribbean. The concepts of purity and pollution had almost disappeared and consequently also the links between occupation and caste. Endogamous unions were not of sufficient frequency to allow the existence of caste, much less its perpetuation. Other factors responsible for the dilution of the caste system were a work schedule in the plantation that did not encourage caste rules, proselytizing efforts of the Christian missionaries, opportunities for social and economic advancement and cultural assimilation (Roopnarine 2006: 3). The general view is that caste endogamy was being replaced by varna endogamy.

Conclusion :- The most striking feature that emerges is the differential change that aspects of caste among the overseas Indians in the Caribbean has undergone. While some institutions have withered, others have shown greater persistence and resilience, thus proving their indispensability to the general structure of Indian society.

Only two features of the "ideal" caste system still remain in these Indian communities. These are separation of castes and varna through endogamy and a notion of hierarchy. Caste is not

the primary basis for activities and relationships, except to some extent in marriages. It reflects upon a person's prestige, but fails to govern his status. Status is derived from other elements such as education, occupation, wealth and political power.

Thus, there is no structural link between caste in India and caste in the overseas community. Even when caste is primarily viewed as a system of social relations, the overseas social system is different and though former caste names may be used in some of these new relations, this does not result in a caste system. Some of the ideas (notions of hierarchy) and relations (endogamy) which lay behind caste relations in India can also be found here. These have not only become highly marginal but are now parts of another society giving rise to new interpretations. Thus, it is not the structural characteristic of caste that has been retained, but a cultural ideology.

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