

Cultural Anthropology, Cast Hierarchy and Religious Values in Modern India*

Elena N. Anikeeva

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University)

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: hotkovskaya7@gmail.com

Abstract—This paper dedicates to complex problem of interrelations between Indian cast system and cultural anthropological traditions, which are rooted in religious values. Indian cultural anthropological division by cast shaped through the ages up to now is alive notwithstanding many-folded modernization in the country. Caste/jati structure arose and based on traditional Hindu hierarchy of ontological and socio-cultural entities from the top to the bottom: from absolute (Divine) Brahman to cosmos, from dvijas/twice-born people to shudras and other outsiders (so called untouchables). Values of cast way of life, cast cultural-religious traditions (jati-dharma) are still in priority for Indians even for those who are not Hindus. The core of Indian cultural anthropology is hierarchy constructed by Brahmins since the epoch of Upanishads, which not only survived but also reinforced and adjusted in present.

Keywords: *cultural anthropology, caste/jati, twice-born/dvija, homo hierarchicus, hierarchical socio-cultural order, cast values, Hindu religious duty/dharma, cultural-religious traditions*

I. INTRODUCTION

Regarding cultural anthropology in modern India, you cannot avoid the problem of cast division and cast tensions issued from it. The origin of casts (jati) ascends to deep ancient culture and religion. However, modern Indians live within cast social and cultural-religious relations. Caste discrimination was denounced by Indian Constitution (§ 15), nevertheless cast system which provokes discrimination did not radically change in spite of many-folded modernization. Cast structure as a multiplicative phenomenon, effects on economic, political, and other fields of society. For conceiving the core of cast system, it is in need to understand the essence of its vertical, or hierarchy that is sacred structure of socio-cultural universe completing the structure of natural universe produced by Divine (Brahman). Hierarchical socio-cultural order claimed in ancient sacred scriptures established the law of contradistinction between dvija/twice-born (second birth after first, physical birth means access to religious rituals and cult) and outsiders. With the help of contemporary authors (David Moose, Suryakant Waghmore, Michael Moffatt, and others), we examine the living capacities of Indian cast cultural anthropology and

resistance of cast values. The purpose of my paper is to consider the hierarchical core of Indian cultural anthropology (homo hierarchicus), the gap and tension between dvijas and non-dvijas, and to interpret interrelations between caste anthropology and religious duty/dharma that sustains cast values.

II. RELIGIOUS SOURCES OF INDIAN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY (CAST HINDU DUTY)

Cast/jati usually defines as an endogenic group with unified profession, or a social group with its inner cultural-religious and labor traditions. If horizontal social relations among different casts mostly generated economically, through labor division, yet vertical inter-cast positions determined by religion from ancient times. Earlier, the vertical of Varnas preceded cast division. Varna division was established even in "Purusha-sukta" of Rig-Veda (X. 90). The body organs of the primordial Man — Purusha in this hymn from his top to his bottom became materials for four Varnas and marked vertical hierarchy. His head became Brahmins, Kshatriyas were made from his arms, torso became Vaishyas, and his bottom, i.e. feet were prepared for shudras, and shudras were made exclusively for the upper Varnas' service. From that historical period, the gap between upper three Varnas and shudras did never bridge, and this gap meant that upper Varnas were *dvija*, twice-born. Second, spiritual birth opened them performing, practicing and participating in Vedic, Brahmanic, further Hindus sacrifices and rituals, hearing, pronouncing Vedic, and other sacred texts, and so on. Shudras and outsiders, later called, as untouchables or, Dalits should not to allow doing any of this; they obeyed severe punishment for even an attempt to touch or hear something in Vedic cult until the murder. *Manusmriti* ("The Laws of Manu") proscribes shudras hearing Veda and presenting near Hindus rituals (II. 103, 175; III. 249; X. 126-127). Shankara, a highest authority in Vedanta and Hinduism, following Manu and earlier lawgiver Gautama says about shudra who if is "listening to the Vedas should have his ears filled with lead or, tin and lac. A shudra is nothing but a walking cemetery, therefore one should not learn (the Scriptures) in his presence" [1]. Thus, religion made a hierarchical order of Indian cultural anthropology with strict subordinate contradistinction between dvijas and outsiders.

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In Maitrayana Upanishad (VII. 8-9) there were some evidences how shudras perceived their destiny, they “are always merry, always begging, always making a living by handiwork; and others who... [are] performing sacrifices for those who are not allowed to offer sacrifices,... and Sudras who know the sacred books; and others who are malignant, who use bad language, dancers, actors, ... They are clearly thieves, and unworthy of heaven” [2]. We draw from the text that already in the times of Upanishads shudras (most of all those who did not want doing service job) were thrown out of Brahmanic world and became dissidents. In addition, they tried to perform some religious rituals not sanctified by Brahmins; they were learned, and they had pupils and disciples. Thus, a number of shudras undertook a cultural and religious revolt against anthropological law of Brahmanism. The reaction of dvijas, mainly Brahmins was oppression of them with peculiar rigid hierarchical Varna (further, cast) soteriology, i.e. Varna (caste) duty/dharma. Varna duty (varnashrama-dharma) as an only way to salvation strictly prescribed executing the duty only of his/her Varna and not the other’s duty. The “Bible of Hinduism” Bhagavadgita (XVIII. 40-44; 47) sustains Varna soteriology with the help of ontological basis and forbids performing the others’ dharma:

“There is no being on earth... that is liberated from the three qualities born of nature.

Of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, as also the Sudras. O Arjuna, the duties are distributed according to the qualities born of their own nature!

Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity... are the duties of the Brahmanas, born of (their own) nature.

Prowess, firmness ... generosity and lordliness are the duties of Kshatriyas, born of (their own) nature.

Agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade are the duties of the Vaishya (merchant class), born of (their own) nature; and the action consisting of service is the duty of the Sudra (servant class), born of (their own) nature...

Better is one’s own duty (though) destitute of merits, than the duty of another well performed. He who does the duty ordained by his own nature incurs no sin” [3].

So, strict hierarchical order was established like the law of the whole universe, natural as well as cultural. Varna hierarchy during formation of Hinduism transferred to cast hierarchy with Brahmins on the top. We shall not here discuss the complex problem of transfiguration of Varna division to cast system, but make only one remark about that unlike four Varnas, the number of castes turned into almost infinite, and the term of each Varna corresponds to super-cast unity classification. The status quo of Varna-cast vertical allowed Louis Dumont to assign Indian individual living in cast society the name *Homo hierarchicus* [4]. Dumont asserts that the basis of this whole society is determined by general values or, intention of everybody to do all that constitutes this hierarchical order, to play his/her own function for stability of this hierarchy. Mention, that etymologically in Greek language, “hierarchy” means the

power of some sacred entity, in Indian variant, either priest or, Brahman as Absolute.

What are the stimuli for people to support hierarchical order? For dvijas, stimuli are evident — to preserve their higher and religiously sanctioned status to be sacred, “pure” casts. However, shudras` stimuli do not look apparently conceivable. Why non-dvijas did not conduct the battle against injustice of Brahmanic social order, as earlier Upanishads mentioned? Paradoxically, they did not continue their opposition or, perhaps as some facts testimony, those revolutionaries were eradicated. Basing on fieldwork with contemporary untouchables in two villages in Tamil Nadu, Professor Michael Moffatt argues that the most striking feature of the lowest castes is their pervasive cultural consensus with those higher in the system; Indian untouchables entirely share the hierarchical values of the caste system [5]. Moffatt continues that untouchables themselves complete the hierarchical whole and accept their low position; thus, the most oppressed members of Indian society are the truest believers in the system.

To my mind, what perpetuates hierarchical cultural anthropology in general is the karma-samsara dogma deeply rooted not only in Brahmanic, but also in other Indian culture-religious traditions. Though many untouchables question their particular positions in the system, they seldom question the system as a whole because the outsiders believe that in future reincarnation (through samsara), they may achieve higher status, and their mysterious intention was to be included in cultural hierarchy of dvijas. The possible revolt or opposition against hierarchy meant total destruction of their dreams and hopes to shift up as for “cast dharma” law transcended dvija’s world and spread over Hindu periphery organizing super-structure and sub-structure of Hinduism with its broad marginal population. Shudras and untouchables within their communities in a manner of distorting mirror reflect Hindu cultural anthropology. In such a way, Brahmanic ideology had provided powerful basis of hierarchical pyramid of cultural anthropology. Hinduism cannot exist without its periphery, i.e. without non-dvijas by implementing cast values into each community.

III. HOW HIERARCHICAL SOCIO-CULTURAL ORDER ADJUSTS

Suryakant Waghmore wrote in 2019 that some scholars announced collapse of caste system in India; he questioned it and investigated the problem if caste hierarchy is living or dying now [6]. One cannot negate that through the ages caste constituted a substantive part of Indian public and private life, however fundamental changes of modernization, democratization, globalization, PR and so on, had essentially move such an ancient and medieval phenomenon as caste. Nonetheless, caste system mimicked and adjusted fluently to new circumstances. Discussing ‘caste hierarchy’ Waghmore disposes “the utopia of a dying caste system and ending hierarchy” [7]. David Mosse agrees: “Statistically, in India the caste into which a person is born remains among the most important determinants of life opportunity” [8]. Indeed, caste continues to construct inequalities and exclusion of

outsiders in all spheres of contemporary life, whether economic, political, or religious and cultural in newer forms, and it generates violence against ex-untouchable castes. Those modernization “changes in material realm and the resulting social mobility continue to reflect persistence of caste hierarchy” [9]. Thus, caste socially and culturally adjusts; the very dynamism of caste survives hierarchical inequalities. Caste may be changing but ‘casteism’, vis. hierarchy continues to be an immanent part of Indian contemporaries.

There are many-folded questions and problems that can be arisen why and how caste hierarchy is alive. We concentrate on one of them concerning cultural and religious caste values. Apart of karma — samsara dogma and the linked peculiarities of Hindus outlook (like priority of Brahman Absolute, moksha etc.) we should mention other believes, somehow prejudices or, norms, which contain in caste values. Almost every Indian knows which caste (or, at least Varna) belongs somebody whom he suddenly meets in the street or somewhere: cloth, shoes (untouchables must go without shoes, as a rule), make-up, pronunciation, ritual or cosmetic signs on the body (*bindu*, *tilaka* on the forehead etc.), then food, — everything has its meaning and speaks about the person’s cast. The most distinguishing in caste values is separation between vegetarianism of ‘pure casts’ who are dvijas and non-vegetarianism of outsiders, hence ‘polluted’ casts. On the occasion, vegetarianism specifies in India by including in plant food animal milk products, which considered as also ‘vegetarian’. Yet non-vegetarianism means eating, touching anything killed, dead body, animal or human, any sewage and dirtiness: these things have demeaning sense, both natural and ritual. In such a pantheistic way, all ‘dirty’ work and professions are under occupation only by ‘impure casts’: funerary work, flaying, leatherwork, cleaning (sweepers), laundry and much of hard handwork. Treated as polluted in daily life, such people in a permanent way ought to be excluded whether through residential segregation, or from common water sources, public spaces including temples, classrooms, and from or any mark of social honor (riding bicycles, having stylish haircuts, etc.) — for preserving the ‘purity’ of dvijas. For them so as religious and physical ‘purity’ stands on the first valuable place. Therefore, the hierarchical vertical by pure-impure division reinforces.

Meanwhile, you cannot find a society without any hierarchy, it is not absent elsewhere (in the army, for example); hierarchy itself is not evil. Harm is discrimination and injustice inferring from hierarchy. What seriously violates human rights to my mind is belief in ontological inequality of people like was proclaimed in Plato’s Republic: the division among “gold”, “silver” and “bronze” citizens made according to their entities. Analogically, caste stratification has the same basis of ontological inequality: cast is given by birth/jati. As a rule, even Dalit person, though fighting for his/her rights do not want to change his/her cast for improving own status. Strangely, but we may not forget basic caste value – the caste itself, which is not only given by birth, given through the law of karma, but

what is more seriously for present life, the intergenerational cast sustenance depending on every caste member, so, his/her loyalty to own cast. Caste value of loyalty implies besides specific cultural-religious and labor traditions the institute of endogamy marriage, which in case of dvijas firstly is the occupation for Brahmins who finds a bride for every bridegroom and secondly, the occupation for marring couples. ‘Marriage by love’ became the euphemism in modern India for those who dare to ignore this religious family law. In addition, loyalty to own cast is not a bondage, but the only way of life because an exile from the caste means truest tragedy, the exiled considered, as a criminal who betrayed his cast and cast duty.

Basic caste values show that Hinduism and caste hierarchy are in interdependent relation. Moreover, some thinkers suppose caste system as a core of Hinduism itself. Outstanding Indian scholar Mysore N. Srinivas made an important discovery — *Sanskritisation*, that is involving and inclusion external larger or smaller social groups and tribes in unity-in-diversity caste structure of Hindus hierarchical order under Brahmin cultural and ideological domination: “there is no other way to confess Hinduism than to be born in one of numerous jati” [10]. Thus, likewise Protestantism — capitalism amalgam (according to Max Weber) there is inextricably linked coexisting of Hinduism and caste system. David Mosse shows that the views on “caste as a residual issue of religion and culture” [11], i.e. ‘inner’ Indian cultural peculiarity do not allow solving caste problems in a broader international resonance, so in important UN document “Sustainable Development Goals” (2015) there is no mention of cast and discrimination by caste. Mosse’s research “gives reasons to pay the same kind of attention to caste in global policy as has been given to gender or race as opportunity-shaping identities” [12]. We fully agree with this statement and negate the ‘residual’ character of religious and cultural aspects of caste. On the contrary, religion and culture dominate in caste hierarchy.

We’d like to add on occasion of David Mosse’s article. He says, “Gandhian utopianism... expected archaic caste to disappear with modernization” [13]. Yes, you can choose different terms for aspirations about ideal society, but the figure of Gandhi-ji himself is not at all a utopian, he is a real hero of anticolonial struggle in his country, and more he manifested a remarkable example of fighting against caste discrimination. It is well known that Gandhi, as true *Mahatma* (“Great Soul”) demonstratively broke inter-caste barriers and ate *together* with untouchables whom he called “harijans” (children of God). Such Gandhi’s conduct seems to be repeating, actualizing and popularizing for those who seriously intend to lead campaign against discrimination by caste. Discrimination, we think does not belong to any culture, and it is not ‘residual’ cultural tradition. Besides Gandhi, other humanistic activists and thinkers in present do much in antidiscrimination affairs. By the way, we may note Ruchira Gupta, Indian and international fighter against sex trafficking which mostly enslaves downtrodden women from lower casts — she and grassroots center Apne Aap are

saving ‘Last Girl’ from forced prostitution [14]. These fighters made big contribution into Indian and world culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

Indian cultural anthropology cannot be understood without Hindu religious hierarchical order, which originated in ancient times as Varna, further as caste division. Caste hierarchy consisting of *Homo hierarchicus* (Dumont) appears its flexibility and quick adjustment to modernity. Caste anthropology and hierarchy though very complex and extensive network, has Brahmins on the top, shudras and ‘untouchables’ (Dalits) in the bottom with majority of cultural signs, symbols and traditions demarcating religiously ‘pure’ dvijas from ‘impure’ outsiders. Persisting caste (jati/birth) values among which deeply rooted belief in karma — samsara law of rebirth, ‘purity’ (for dvijas), strong restriction to violate dvijas` ‘purity’ (for non-dvijas), jati inner endogamous marriage are essential. There are people in modern India, who being true Hindus showed remarkable examples of overcoming caste prejudices and discrimination issued from hierarchical order.

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