

Caste Identity: In relation to Tradition and Modernity

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Modernity is an economic force with social, cultural, and political correlatives. Tradition is a cultural force with social, economic, and political correlatives. Though asymmetrical in their relation, they require us, in talking of one, to talk also of the other. They induce us to move as nimbly as possible between theoretical abstraction and experiential reality. But their separation is itself part of the mythological drama in current Indian thought, just as their mutual implication is the import of the same ironic smile that brings to an effective close any conversation one hears here about them. And so we take them in turn only, finally, to see them speaking to each other through the lives of acquaintances, informants, and fiction protagonists. Even as one considers those abstract systems, one must choose to emphasize either their institutions or their logical or cognitive structures. Putting by for a bit the second, we should think first about Village, Joint Family, and Caste, the latter being the point at which the distinction fully collapses between “institution” and “cognitive structure”. These are the key institutions of tradition but as we focus on caste in this paper, we’ll concentrate on caste identity here in relation to tradition and modernity.

The third institution is that of caste, and here one must distinguish between varna, the four castes idealized in the Vedas, and jati, the much-proliferated and regionally quite various denominations based mostly upon actual occupations. The second moves us into the power relations of daily life in which one’s Brahmin friends complain that jobs

are there only for the “Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes”, as the reservation (or quota) legislation terms them, while one’s friends from the other end of the spectrum complain about the Brahmin (or, alternatively, the Tamil) “mafia” that runs everything in a social reality being rapidly restructured within a “modern” class system subsidiary to the global consumer economy, there may be plenty of truth in both perspectives. But jati, the occupational castes, organize social life, economic contacts and often basic options, value systems, and family customs, and even ethnosociological profiles of the sort statisticians love best. The varna order tidies into four classes the functional divisions of Indian social organization and derives its authority from its Vedic origins. As an abstract, conceptual order it trips us over into the other emphasis in thinking about tradition, namely it’s logical or cognitive system.

One of the more illuminating book about caste is by Veena Das, “Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual” (Second Edition; Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982), a book which balances a structuralist sense of culture as a language with a very open and flexible model of linguistic structuring, and which draws upon Das’s career of fieldwork to temper her readings of the Sanskrit texts upon caste theory. Sometime we confuse “caste” with “class” and though there is positive correlation between economic standing and caste, it is also true that particularly since independence the two are increasingly independent variables. (it is for example, the middle castes from which many of the nouveaux riches emerge, and feminist Madhu Kishwar has argued that it is upper and middle caste peasant family structure that in its vertical and geographical spread through Indian society is worsening the condition of rural women.)

Caste is not strictly economic, nor is it purely hierarchical as class strata tend to be. Brahmins, that is, are the “highest” caste from a spiritual or religious perspective, but the kings were kshatriyas. Das argues that the king and the Brahmin were bound in reciprocal but not hierarchical

obligations, and moves swiftly to make us understand the implications of the “statuses” (as she calls them) distributed within the systems of caste and ashramadharma (the Way one may call it, appropriate for one’s age-related stage in life). That is, these statuses don’t need the geological metaphor of sedimentary levels, but the linguistic metaphor of how syntactically, a culture articulates its social relations. We can glimpse in what follows just what Das achieves with this metaphor:

“These relations between the statuses express the structural order of Sanskrit Hinduism in terms of a mediated opposition between the asocial and social, and within the social in terms of a categorical partition between the holders of temporal power (king), inherent spiritual merit (Brahmin), and the non-Brahmin mass of householders within the caste system”

The inside version of social realities are represented in a novel like *Samskara*, which matters greatly from this point of view. For the moment, most useful for us is how this reading of caste complicates the typical and simplistic Western interpretation of caste as class oppression. That oppression certainly exists, but Das wants us to understand how these social categories and their associated ways of living are more than a rationale for privilege. These dharmas segment exist and enable individuals to transpose the paradigmatic morphology of Hinduism into the syntagmatic realities of history. Amorphous experience becomes the words and grammar by which one’s life is spoken.

Das’s work is analogous in its effect to that of T.N. Madan’s “Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture” (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987), which corrects the Brahmanic view toward otherworldliness in Western caricatures of India. Again and again, Madan takes pairs of terms that strike Western ears as oppositions and shows they do not participate in the valorization inherent in Western binary thought but are instead like Nandy’s “exclusive parts” within an enlarged inclusive whole”. (For example, the asceticism of the holy elder

and the worldly concerns of the householder are age-appropriate phases of one life not opposed metaphysical belief systems; the Brahmin's management of offal are unequal in status and pleasantness, but equal essential dimensions of human community.) Paralleling Das's argument at several points, Madan argues that rituals and categorical schema are "efforts to establish the proper relations between (the relevant terms)" Ultimately, one infers from Das, such cultural forms as ritual performatively maintain "bounded and articulated states as opposed to liminal and disarticulated states". Hence if jati, castes proliferate, compete for relative status, disappear, subdivide, then, from the privileged perspective of the ascendant groups, the varna castes continue to parse the grammar of utopian social relations bequeathed from the Vedic tradition.

To conceive of caste not simply as a Western pyramid of power, but as a circular graph of an intimately contiguous set of relations within an inclusive whole, means that we all get quite different summaries of basic principles of life depending upon where in that circle we stand. It is male Brahmin voices that have historically held the attention of Western listeners, and only comparatively recently have the effects of that dominance begun to change in response to post-Independence study of Dalits, and women (to name the most sensationally excluded groups from many ethnosociological studies of India). Ramanujan's "context-sensitivity" prods us toward trying to complicate our imagery of Indian social reality; Das and Madan starts us toward a relational grammar with glimpses of the often unheard speakers of non-Brahmanical social dialects.

Tradition is always inflected by rulers and carries ruling class interests. But they don't monopolize the language either. The lexicon and syntax of the language remains amenable to a variety of interests and quite capable of so penetrating the consciousness of a population that it provides the basic terms and mechanics for addressing social and

personal issues alike, and from more perspectives than those implied by its valorized terms and categories. We know, in other words, that this modeling of Tradition is not the whole story, but it does provide its most typical narratology.

References:

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