



SUMMARY

ANTHROPOLOGY OF INDIAN CASTE

The Indians are famous for their highly sophisticated patterns of social life and their “caste system”. Their religion (Hindu Dharma) controls and systematises ways of living and thinking of the people thus making unity and continuity of the Hindu world possible. Śāstric concepts of varṇa (‘class, rank’), jāti (kith and kin, lit. ‘birth, species’) and caturvarṇāśramadharmā (lit. ‘dharma of four varnas and four stages of life’) underlie every traditional form of social, economic and religious life in India even today. Ideology of Hindu social order actually formulates a paradigm for reproducing a segmented society with its kin-based organization, segregation and complementarity between encapsulated social units (jātis and clans). Its influence goes far beyond the limits of four varnas to the so called Untouchables and non-Hindu communities. Western theorising on caste only superficially takes the Brahmanical social tradition into consideration, leaving certain phenomena of Indian social life beyond its explanatory range. Key social category of jāti is usually substituted by Western innovations of “caste” or “sub-caste” and remains underestimated.

Anthropological evidence supports the assertion that a Varṇa-Jāti social system is essentially tribal by origin. There is a great probability that the very concept of jāti was inherited from prehistoric tribal equalitarianism with its related practice of maintaining boundaries and identities, tribal notions of solidarity and distributive economy (exchange of resources). A social category of jāti derives its essence

from a notion that only a closed group of real and would-be relatives can share “a common fate”. Strict endogamy protects the community’s means of subsistence and property (women also) from the claimant strangers. It was from this remote past that archaic social institutions, terminology and ideology of Hindu social order came to nowadays. The notion of *birādarī* (lit. ‘brotherhood’) plays a significant role in *Varṇa-Jāti* organization and caste ideology. This word **actually means** the quality or state of being equal, or “sharing one destiny”. *Birādarī* implies status parity between families and kin groups; people connected by *birādarī* ties create a circle of equals which is called by the same word *birādarī*. Status parity is important in every aspect of social communicating, including marital relations. In the latter case a number of socially and ritually equal exogamous clans (*kulas*, *gotras*, *pangālis*, *vakaiyaras* and others) forms a marriage circle (*birādarī* of clans, i.e. a *jāti*), which members may intermarry without losing their social position. This “pool of marital partners” makes up a *jāti* which thus can be regarded as an endogamous unit in which “communicating on equal footing” is practiced in the form of isogamy or hypergamy, i.e. *anuloma*. *Jāti* is endogamous circle of its component clans and lineages; *jāti* (tribe or quasi-tribe) is the basic unit of Hindu social structure. *Birādarī*, or the status equality (status parity) is a structural principle not less important for the caste organization than hierarchy, but it remains underestimated by academic knowledge, totally bewitched by the “caste hierarchy”. A *jāti* is either an ancient tribe remained in existence up to nowadays (usually acknowledged as “ethnic caste”) or a newly composed aggregation of intercommunicating clans (i.e. quasi-tribe), as it is the case with many Brahman, artisan and menial castes.

Even today the *Varṇa-Jāti* organization keeps commonality of “tribesmen”, exogamous descent groups and other archetypal identities and forms of **sociality working**. Hindu social order provides social security for every component of it by natural law. Here we see common consumption of natural resources and culturally produced goods in accordance with status of a *jāti*. These are social relations of status and distribution, characterized by “exchange in food, women and products of labour”. Social prestige is obtained in such communities with the number of guests fed, abundance of dishes served, presents distributed and money spent for performing rituals. The principle of *dāna* (lit. ‘gift’) is **all-pervasive in Indian social culture**. Egalitarian tribal ideology is scrupulously maintained in a group of “untouchable”

castes also. Many of them exercised transition from tribe to caste quite recently and continue their tribal stereotypes in a full range. Regarded ritually polluted these Dalit jātis are socially discriminated, politically oppressed and constitute the poorest segment of population.

Indian caste system is usually regarded as a method of deliberately restricted intercultural communication for the Indo-Aryans surrounded by anārya (“non-Aryan”) indigenous tribes. This method had originated at the times of their first contacts and was constituted and refined in the dharmasāstra period as a principle of social life (“law”). Actually, Hindu social order with its segregational regulations and taboos seems to be a kind of adaptational strategy to the conditions of Indian environment with its remarkable ethnic and cultural variability, overpopulation in the areas good for agriculture, general shortage of natural resources and endless challenges coming from outside the system. In the harshness of tropical climate encapsulated nature of social groups was in some way advantageous. Certain archaic ideas regarding commensality, marriage, eating and drinking as magically significant activities were essential in the formation of Varṇa-Jāti organization, as well as related concepts of taboo and mana (soul-stuff). The very idea of pollution seems to be borrowed from the culture of pre-Aryan aboriginal tribes. It was interpreted by priests as magic and hygienic necessity and was sanctified as religious requirement to keep ritual purity in the “defiling” contacts with the “aliens” (i.e., with those who are not included into his own jāti). For this reason social interaction is **minimized to the utmost. There exists a gradation** of contacts based on the degree of their intimacy: an accidental encounter on the road, staying together in a cloistered place, touching, sitting close to one another, taking water from one’s hands, taking food from one’s hands, smoking together, eating together, and finally conjugal relations. The closer are contacts the narrower is the circle of people making these contacts.

Anthropological research proves the evidence that structural composition of caste society is the result of juxtaposition of two separate social models developed by Vedic and pre-Aryan peoples respectively. The Vedic Aryans exercised the division of labour in the form of estates-varnas. Social differentiation of pre-Aryan population was clan-based and had led to the development of a segmented society with its mode of controlling economic resources. There already existed professionally specialised lineages of priestly elite, qualified ivory carvers, jewellers, makers of parasols, wine brewers, silk weavers and

others. Tribal communities were thus transformed into a stratified society, and kin-based jātis and kulas became “encapsulated” elementary units of more complex social structure with its constituent varnas. In **Varṇa-Jāti society each jāti remained encapsulated**, understanding its separate identity even as it was involved into interaction and interdependent relationships, and stratification in the form of varna divisions was imposed onto the segmentary system resulting in the formation of varna status system. There was no desintegration of kin-based tribal structures in the process — they were incorporated into the power structure of state formation. A hierarchy of ethnic groups was established on the grounds of economic specialization. Location of tribes in different environmental zones and their ecologically determined occupational specialization was considered fundamental. Different jātis were practicing different types of subsistence depending on the nature of their basic resources. Varnas as estates had their own statuses based on principle of division of labour, so the ranking of occupations became of primary importance. The priestly class of Brahmins hold the uppermost position in caste hierarchy. Nomads, especially those who lived by keeping of horses and those who lived by plunder and cattle raids come the next since they were granted the position of Kshatriyas (as the Aryans themselves were). Those who practiced a sedentary agrarian lifestyle, agriculture and animal husbandry, and especially plough cultivation of crops, were permitted status of Sudras only. Manual occupations were reserved for Sudras since. Vaishyas took intermediate position in between the producers of goods and consumers of highest varnas; their professional activity is middlemen’s. Those tribes who subsist on hunting, fishing and gathering represent the lowest level of material existence; in varna hierarchy they find themselves in the lowest categories of Sudras or beget a status of the Untouchables out of four varnas. The economic dimension of stratification is **further emphasized by a distinctive style of life and other characteristic aspects of culture of ethnic groups making them fit for existence under the conditions of their environments**. Social status of a jāti depends on its typical way of life, its “cultured” or “non-cultured” usages and the ritual status of its occupation — superior and sacred or inferior and degrading. Status evaluation is essential for caste-type social interaction. Clans and jātis arrange themselves in status circles and alignments formed on the grounds of hierarchy or equivalence; this is a method of communication.

Hinduism upholds a Varṇa-Jāti system of inequality by the idea of Universal and individual Dharma and formulates the idea of human society by opposing “culture (samskṛti)” against “nature (prakṛti)”. A culture the Indian way is to consider a Brahmanic ritual as necessary accompaniment for any kind of activity, whether it is subsistence-related work or physiological activity. Sanskritization (lit. ‘acculturation’) or extending of Brahmans’ spiritual power over the masses of aboriginal population of the Indian subcontinent is a unique and a universal way of socialization for any jāti in India — be it a Hindu jāti eager to improve its inherited status or a jāti just beginning its way of integration into Hindu society. Sanskritization of tribes continues today; they are incorporated into the Hindu society as lower “scheduled” castes. Successive waves of foreign invaders and settlers (like Shaka Scythians and others) were also involved into the Sanskritization process and now form a part of Indian population. The Sanskritization or introduction of non-Hindu tribes into the pale of Indo-Aryan culture and Hindu society had produced many effects. It contributed to Indian ethnic and social multiculturalism and even to cosmic sizes of Hindu pantheon. Hindu society developed its cellular structure, and Hindu culture acquired its variability. Sanskritized ethnic elements are usually acknowledged as “castes of ethnic origin” or as tribe-to-caste transitional units. Sanskritization was going without forcing the people to give up their own norms, beliefs, customs and practices, they could retain their pre-Aryan cultural features, languages and social institutions, that is, culture which they wanted to preserve and transmit to the next generations. Tribe-to-caste transitional units with their respective mode of subsistence are recognizable readily. E.g., some hunters and gatherers take a basket-weaving as their caste occupation, while keeping their tribal organization (sometimes, they trace their descent through the maternal line), and tribal religions. This variability is maintained by Brahmanic concept of svadharma, i.e. a sacralization of the way of living of every “kind of people created by gods”.

Sanskrit words varṇa and jāti define social categories inherited by birth, and differentiated by status of birth. The concept of jāti cannot be separated from such basic concepts of Hinduism as dharma, karma and saṃsāra. For a Hindu the birth in a given jāti is predetermined by his karma accumulated in previous lives also spent in different jātis, often not in a human appearance. The present life conditions the future one and predestines a particular jāti in which a person will be born. The Brahmans assume that there exist a great many human jātis and

not the only biological species *Homo sapiens*. Different *jāti*s possess different *raison d'être*. The principal aspect of this *raison d'être* is the inborn predestination or occupational specialization, i.e. *jāti-dharma*. Difference between people belonging to different *jāti*s: Brahmins, water-carriers, potters, blacksmiths and others is regarded as being basically the same as difference existing in the Nature between plants, animals and other animated creatures. Human society is thus regarded as a natural component of the cosmic order. The existence of a great variety of *jāti*s each possessing a predestination is a necessary condition of the Universal harmony. Cooperation between different human *jāti*s can guarantee a harmonized social life which contributes to the maintenance of Universal Dharma. This way the Brahmanic ideology of *jāti-dharma* arranges different *jāti*s in order to maintain social stability and to perform rituals in a proper way. Thus the division of labour is understood and rigidly controlled in Hindu society.

Jāti-dharma, or law of existence for a *jāti*, is determined by the “inborn” profession (occupation) which is regarded as the only appropriate to that very *jāti* way of earning its living and as its social duty as well. The working activity prescribed by *jāti-dharma*, i.e. acknowledged by the society, is regarded as a life-long act of religious piety, as a *dharma*-fulfilling deed. It is a fulfillment of one’s *jāti-dharma* which makes a person a practicing Hindu. If he is not a Brahmin he is not required to concentrate on performing rituals by the altar; rather, his ritual practice consists in qualified performing of his own “inborn” labour obligations to the benefit of caste society. Especially the artisan *jāti*s have minutely articulated outline of technical and ritual procedure (*śīlpaśāstra*) for their long-life ritual of producing artifacts. Artisan’s working is competitive to Creation, and has a special magic aspects in it. The institute of *jāti* and ideology of *jāti-dharma* is evidently an instrument of social inequality. Nevertheless, it guaranteed social security by division of labour, and played a crucial role in preventing pandemics in over-populated India and secured peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups.

Inner structure of the *jāti*s is based exclusively on kinship network. Thus the ethnicity of *jāti* is exposed. Exogamous clan *kula* also has a *dharma* of its own. *Kula-dharma* is related to that range of religious beliefs and rituals which are accomplished within a family, and are defined by scholars as “religious practice of Hinduism”. It is because of *kula-dharma* that in Hinduism there equally exist many different models of piety. They are regarded as clan traditions which have to be

maintained to show respect for ancestors and the mother-goddess of the clan. The Hinduism itself acquired its eclectic form in the course of Sanskritization of different kulas by “collecting” various Vedic and non-Vedic cults and religious practices (kula-dharmas) into a however shapeless but a unified body (Great and Little Traditions of Hinduism). Christianity is regarded as a new kula-dharma for a baptized caste whereby it organizes its contacts with birādārīs. There are many spiritual orders in the bhakti tradition which structure themselves as kulas and jātis. New members may enter the order not by their birth right as in a common jāti but, as in Brahmanic gotra, through the rite of initiation.

Morphological structure of any historical modification of Indian traditional society definitely follows Varṇa-Jāti organisation. Multiple identities of Indian social units are kin- and jāti-based. The idea of birādārī is instrumental at the supra-jāti levels as well. Versatility of jāti is remarkable, and numerous jāti-clusters come into existence regularly. Jāti-clusters may be organized considering one of many possible parameters, or some sort of equality. Jāti-clusters appear in the cases when several jātis find it advantageous to notice one another, to regard each other as being equal and to act together. They do it to facilitate political tasks or to meet some other important practical ends of modern situation. A Jajmānī community is a kind of jāti-cluster also.

A problem of caste identity is especially significant. In our approach to the problem, the caste can be defined as a jāti-cluster, voluntarily composed of a number of endogamous jātis (“sub-castes”) possessing equal statuses. Caste system is a classification system for innumerable jātis. Caste, being a category of ideology and status, became a counterpart to varna. It is obvious that there is no traditional necessity for jātis to unite into a caste because they never intermarry and do not communicate in the ritual sphere. This means that not marital, but social, professional and ideological factors, some of them quite accidental, bring a caste to life. Nevertheless, a caste identity turned to be useful in modern highly politicized situation for purposes other than mere reproducing of Hindu social order. It looks like an instrument of modern party-life and distribution of power. Every Indian traditionally identifies himself and any other person in a jāti, but today sometimes he finds a caste identity useful. The process of caste formation was greatly influenced by the fact that castes were included into special lists when Censuses of British India were undertaken, and

were mentioned in another official documents. Even today they are scheduled. In course of this process the jāti names, derived from markers of their statuses became caste nominations. Caste name often coincides with occupational designation, especially in the case with artisans. For this reason carpenters, potters, jewellers and other castes of artisans always consist of abnormally great numbers of jātis and individuals.

Caste as a complex of “characteristic features” enumerated in much detail in scholarly literature, entered Indian life from the pages of books and documents written by foreigners. As a result, today many Indians identify themselves and represent their society using misleading loanwords borrowed from foreign studies. Descriptions of Indian villages using caste terminology, mentioning sub-castes, etc. are abundant. Generally speaking, social anthropology of India should focus on a wide variety of the Varṇa-Jāti universum with its ethnic, social, professional, religious, tribal, etc. components, rather than on such an artificial construction as the caste.

