

India: Culture and Society

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Introduction

I am delighted to be part of this conference on India and I would like to begin by thanking the organizers for inviting me and enabling me to come to Rio de Janeiro to present my paper before you. India, in some ways like Brazil and China, the three growing economic powers of this period, is an ancient society which has seen considerable modernization and change. When Indianists, sociologists and anthropologists began to study Indian society, they depicted it principally in accordance with three variables: caste, village and family. These were said to be the three great institutions of traditional Indian society. Of course, traditional society was also considered largely as Hindu society.

Thus, the three-to-five generational, patrilineal, patrilocal joint family was considered the bulwark of traditional Hindu society. This society was divided into numberless castes, regionally specific; but, across the country the logic of *varna* ordered the castes into a more rigid hierarchy: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. The *avarna* castes were considered pariah, even untouchable. Even Marx understood India as a village society, its villages 'little republics', largely untouched by the dynamics of political or social change. These pictures of Indian culture and society were, as we shall see, to a considerable extent true but were also somewhat problematic and scholars soon began to realize that the real situations had always been more complex and intricate.

Caste, village and joint family: The *real* story

It was when scholars began to rely on ethnographic **fieldwork** rather than solely on ancient texts, especially those in Sanskrit, to understand Indian society that they started to see the complexity of real social formations. This became well-known as the field-view

of Indian society, as opposed to the book-view. Others argued that the book-view and the field-view must be placed side-by-side; one should not be rejected in favor of the other. Clearly, a considerable shift had taken place in the way in which Indian society was studied.

It is true that the Indian caste system was one of the harshest systems of hierarchy to be found in the world. Each caste found its place in the hierarchy in accordance with the rules of purity and pollution. Occupations, food, materials and even persons were ranged on a scale from purest to most impure. For instance, occupations that involved contact with bodily or other waste – scavenging, leather-work and the like were considered deeply polluting. Meat was eaten only by the lower castes. The structural distance between castes was defined in terms of purity and impurity. A higher caste was pure and would therefore avoid certain forms of contact with the lower castes in terms of eating food cooked by them or marrying or having sexual relations. Sometimes, there could even be a ban on touching. This formed the basis for the notorious practice of untouchability, whereby the touch or even the shadow of certain castes was considered polluting for the higher castes. Castes considered untouchable would have to maintain a certain physical distance from the high castes. Inadvertent touch would entail a ritual cleansing process for the higher caste person. A person was born into a caste, practiced the caste occupation, married and died in the caste and could rarely hope for change or a better or different life.

Despite all this, it is now accepted that the caste structure was never a completely rigid social system. Avenues of mobility and flexibility were available within the structure of caste. Despite the closed nature of the system, there have been shifts in the caste hierarchy over time. For instance, certain cultural practices acceptable during the Vedic Hindu period came to be considered taboo in later times, with the impact of Buddhism and Jainism. These practices included the drinking of liquor (*soma*), the offering of animal sacrifices and the eating of beef. In a later period, these practices were abhorred, but they continued among the castes considered low on the social scale.

Important channels of mobility in the ancient period included conversion to Jainism, Buddhism or other heterodox sects, migration and the renunciation of the world in favor of the life of a mendicant. There has always been heterodoxy within the Hindu

world. Sectarian movements often rejected caste and called for socio-religious reform. It is another matter, of course, that over a period of time, some of them simply began to be considered *yet* another caste within the overall society. An important path of mobility in both traditional and more contemporary periods has been that defined by the sociologist M N Srinivas as *sanskritization*. *Sanskritization* is a process where a low Hindu caste changes its customs, rites, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born caste. The twice-born castes are those belonging to the Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaishya groups.

Another path of mobility from the colonial period onwards has been that of westernization. M N Srinivas defined westernization as the changes brought about in Indian society and culture as a consequence of the over 150 years of British rule. It is a term that covers changes in technology, institutions, ideology and values. Thus, particular castes began to adopt a westernized life-style including the consumption of meat and alcohol and the espousal of western values of equality and individualism and the like. Conversion to Christianity was yet another avenue of social mobility available to the *avarna* communities during the colonial period. There were several large-scale, group conversions from the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Literature on the family in India was also, for a long time, saddled with particular assumptions. Especially, it was considered that the three-to-five generational patrilineal household was the typical familial living arrangement among Hindus. The 'joint Hindu family' thus remained a standard reference in a lot of early literature. There emerged a popular understanding that all Hindus lived together in such joint families, eating at the same hearth and sharing property in common. However, the reality has been considerably different. Scholarship has now shown that the nuclear or small joint family (with two married couples) is and has probably always been typical of India. The existence of a complete joint family, where married sons continue to stay in the same house with their parents, married and unmarried brothers and sisters, pool their expenses together and eat together, is rare.

Anthropologists have also shown that there is no such thing as a perpetual joint or nuclear family. At different stages in their development cycles, households may move from being nuclear to being joint and, further, to different degrees of joint-ness. Even

when joint families are found, analysis has revealed that it is the small joint family consisting of not more than two married couples that is most typical household unit in India. The nuclear and supplemented nuclear family (which may be treated as 'joint') are also equally common. It is more common to find one married son living with his parents, than to find married brothers living in the same household, with or without their parents. Further, while joint families can occur across castes, it is agreed that they generally tend to be found more often among the higher castes.

With respect to gender differences, however, it is true that traditional families had several restrictive implications, especially for women. Women joined their husband's family on marriage and retained few rights in their natal home. Property was inherited in the male line. Marriages were arranged by elder family members and the bride and groom would meet only at the wedding ceremony. Women had little mobility outside the home and even within their marital home they had to carefully veil in front of senior male members of the household. A young bride would expect to be burdened with household responsibilities; it was often only after many years of marriage that a woman, if she had begotten male children, would be able to gradually cement her place within her husband's household.

Kanyadan, or the idea of marriage as the 'gift of the virgin bride', prevailed in almost all parts of the country, and does so even today. Among the higher castes, in particular, the bride was considered a gift given to the husband and his family and a great deal of stress was placed on her being a virgin. With the bride other material gifts were always sent to the husband's house. These constituted the *stridhan* or what is called, in the literature, the 'dowry'. The practice of gift-giving was largely unidirectional, from the bride's natal home to her marital home. The nature and cost of gifts were largely decided by regional and caste custom and were related to the status of the families connected by the marriage.

Despite many similarities, the life-trajectories of women varied according to region, caste and class. Women of the lower social classes almost always worked outside the home, in the fields, as vendors of small goods or at other petty jobs. In particular, rural working women of the lowest castes could often be very vulnerable to exploitation – economic, social and even sexual – by their upper-caste, male employers. It should not be

surprising, therefore, that upward mobility on the caste hierarchy was almost everywhere accompanied by the immurement of women within the confines of the home and their removal from outside employment. The gendered division of labour has been typically impacted by both norms of caste and kinship.

The literature on the Indian village has been plagued by several assumptions. Whether it was Marx who made notorious the phrase ‘village republics’ or some other historians and social scientists, for a long time a myth persisted that Indian villages were isolated, self-enclosed and self-sufficient units. The needs of the villagers were met largely within the villages and contact with the outside world was minimal. The villages remained untouched by larger political events or upheavals and, therefore, continued to remain more or less unchanged despite different kinds of political fluctuations. Of course, fieldwork and social history changed this view.

For one, it has been realized that villages were always connected with markets as well as with towns, especially those that were part of pilgrimage routes. Secondly, caste patterns were regional in character and caste and marriage ties created links between villages, at least within a particular range. In north India, the ideology of hypergamy and the custom of village exogamy ensured that daughters were married outside village boundaries, sometimes at quite a distance. Mendicants, genealogists, priests and others formed connections between village-folk and the towns. Local markets brought together persons from neighboring villages and, sometimes, from nearby towns as well.

Certainly, from the colonial period onwards, the development of infrastructure increased communication between towns and villages. The postal system and, especially the railways, opened up remote parts of the country, linking villages with towns and cities. Migration from the villages into the cities began to increase, as employment opportunities grew and some industries also started to come up. Village-dwellers who came to the city rarely entered a strange or anonymous world. They had contacts of caste or sometimes kinship. Even when these links were very nebulous or distant, kin and caste-members looked out for and helped each other. Early industrialists often engaged labor through middlemen – called jobbers. This increased the possibility that the workers came from specific areas or groups of villages and could well be kinsmen or caste-fellows.

Workers in urban areas sent money to their villages and went home to work during the busy agricultural seasons. They continued their patronage of village and clan deities and were present in their villages during major religious festivals. Marriages took place in the village and, sometimes, wives and children continued to reside there. Family members came to the city, in search of work or in pursuit of education and had to be put up and looked after. Someone might come to get treatment at a city hospital. Shared interests in land continued to hold patrikin together. Thus, village and city could hardly be considered separate worlds, closed-off to each other. One would have to speak in terms of a rural-urban continuum rather than a rural-urban divide, especially when it came to the maintenance of social ties.

There are many other aspects of Indian society that came to be focused on when anthropologists started doing serious fieldwork. The patriarchal bias of a lot of early writing came to be revealed and feminists as well as sociologists began to point out the gendered nature of society as well of sociological texts. Now there is a growing body of literature on women and on gender, whether with respect to the family or kinship relations, development or ideas about religion, sexuality and the body. It is true that women in traditional society did not have much say, but there were always variations. India is and has been home to some matrilineal communities, particularly in its north-eastern and south-western parts. In patrilineal communities, often caste as well as kinship rules operate to constrain women.

Traditionally, social identity was obtained from the father, but the boy was considered a permanent member of his father's lineage, while the girl was only a transient member. Marriage and the transfer of a girl to her marital role combined with the rule of hypergamy and impermanent membership of a girl in her natal family had particular implications. Property passed down the male line and girls had only the right to marriage gifts and maintenance. In traditional families, women did an enormous amount of unpaid but valuable work. However, much of it was household labour and did not involve women leaving their homes. Among lower social and economic levels, however, women more often than not engaged in productive labour, in agriculture, craft work or even poultry farming. A woman's income belonged to her husband and his family and she rarely retained full control over it.

The control of female sexuality was always a central concern for families and kin-groups. Girls had to be controlled until they could be handed over pure and unsullied into the hands of their husband's family. Virginity was highly valued and this placed considerable restrictions on the mobility and educational and economic pursuits of young girls; they had to remain secure until marriage. The practice of the seclusion of women has been closely tied up with the need to control female sexuality. Seclusion became a particular matter of concern after a girl entered puberty. These concerns have always been greater for the higher castes because of their need to ensure that women did not enter into unsuitable, hypogamous unions with lower-caste men.

The bias towards the study of Hinduism in the early sociological literature has also come to be somewhat repaired. There is now a greater appreciation of the diversity of Indian society and the fact that it is made up of many religious and ethnic groups, which have complex and intricate, even if not always harmonious, relations with each other. Studies of Muslim, Christian and other groups show both similarities and differences with Hindu society. When it comes to ideas about caste, gender and the family, there are considerable similarities across patrilineal India, though some tribal groups, especially matrilineal ones, throw up some critical differences. On the other hand, there are differences in the extent to which such ideas prevail across groups; there are also differences of religious organization and patterns of beliefs.

There is a great deal of syncretism in south Asian religions: individuals and groups participate in shared cultures in which there is an engagement of practices and beliefs. One finds Hindus visiting Sufi Muslim shrines or *dargahs* (tombs) and making vows at the churches of important saints. Christians may also visit Hindu or Muslim traditional healers. Many medieval and modern saints such as the Muslim-born Shirdi Sai Baba consciously spread a message of inter-religious harmony. However, there has also been a long history of discord between communities, in particular between Hindus and Muslims. The Partition of the country in 1947 into secular India and Islamic Pakistan cast another long shadow on Hindu-Muslim relations in the country. Muslims remain, to a large extent, marginalized and ethnic strife in independent India has been mostly between Hindus and Muslims, with the latter bearing the far heavier burden of loss – of lives and property.

Social change in modern India

While in the above paragraphs I have tried to chart out for you the patterns of social relations that came to be revealed to sociologists and anthropologists when they set out to do fieldwork in different parts of the country, this section will focus on the changes in Indian society. Modern India is changing very rapidly and society today presents some fascinating as well as contradictory trends. One of the most important changes in India is economic change. Already during the colonial period the new means of transportation and communication and the development of cities had brought in a degree of economic and social change. People began to migrate to the cities in search of work and modern education. The barriers of caste began to slowly break down or become more flexible. Children were no longer compelled to follow the occupation of their parents; they could aspire for different and better work. Such change was, indeed, revolutionary in the context of Indian society. The ideas of liberty, equality, democracy and the like began to have a slow but sure impact on the colonized people; the struggle for Independence has shown the importance such ideas had for educated Indians.

British rule initiated the process of secularization in India, a tendency which, to some extent, became stronger after Independence. However, contrary to expectations, the role of religion either in the lives of people or in public and political life has by no means vanished in India. Secularization entailed a process of differentiation whereby the various aspects of society – economic, political, legal, moral, familial and religious – become *discrete* in relation with each other. This has occurred to some degree. For instance, the rules of purity and impurity that applied to castes have declined to a considerable extent. Urban life has its own pressures and does not permit rigid rules to remain in place.

In office spaces, public spaces and the industrial or corporate world, the rules of caste hardly apply. One works with persons of many different castes and sometimes all may eat from the same cafeteria. Cooks, stewards or waiters in restaurants or cafés are not necessarily of high caste, but one and all eat at such places without regard to these matters. Most restaurants serve both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food and the dishes or plates would not necessarily be kept separate. On trains, buses or at public places one rubs shoulders with persons of all castes, classes and religions. The law also prevents

discrimination against persons on the basis of caste or religion. Rituals are being shortened and sometimes they are dropped altogether. New celebrations taken over from Western society – Father's day, Mother's day or Valentine's day – are becoming important for urban, educated folk.

There is an increase in the age of marriage and women increasingly have an opportunity to get education and work before and after marriage. While more girls enter careers now-a-days, this is sometimes because men want educated and employed brides. However, there is also a sharp increase in women working because they want to carve out independent careers. Men and women meet and try to discover areas of compatibility, even when marriages largely continue to be arranged by family members. However, there is also an increase in inter-caste, inter-religious marriages, especially among the urban, educated elite. Among such groups, the income, life-style and education of the partners often counts for as much if not more than just caste position.

Divorce rates are soaring in modern India and it is becoming more common as well as more accepted for divorcees and the widowed to enter into new marriages. Because of migration and mobility, the modern Indian family is more often than not nuclear in composition. There are changes too in fertility patterns, with more among the urban sections settling for just one or two children. While, traditionally, it was the son who looked after his parents during old age, there are many cases now-a-days of women, especially single women, taking on these responsibilities. Marriage was the rule in the past, but there are increasing numbers of women (and some men) who remain single. This may be out of choice especially among the urban elite, but it may also happen due to a variety of other reasons. For instance, a woman may remain single because of the need to look after aged parents or younger brothers and sisters.

Continuity persists, however, in the preference for male children. Fertility control and female foeticide together ensure that the sex ratio remains very skewed, often more so in the urban and richer areas of the country. Thus, richer areas of the country including, for instance, Punjab and Gujarat display a very low sex ration. A man's parents often stay with him or they may move from one son's home to the other. Else, they may live close by to their children. Parental support is vital for young couples in urban areas. Where both men and women work, parents are often called upon to care for

the young grandchildren. Even if brothers rarely reside together, they often share expenses related to, for instance, the marriage of a sister or ritual celebrations in the family.

Similarly, rituals and the observance of caste rules never entirely disappear. While caste may recede from certain areas of life, it remains in others and even thrives. Scholars have written about the capacity of modern Indians to *compartmentalize* their lives. In this context, it is interesting to remember what one informant said to a well-known anthropologist: 'When I put on my shirt to go the office, I take off my caste, and when I come home and take off my shirt, I put on my caste' (quoted in Srinivas 1988: 123). It is still true that an overwhelming number of Indian marriages, and not just in rural areas, are arranged by the families concerned. In fact, various surveys have shown that young Indian men and women have little trouble adjusting to such 'other-arranged' marriages and believe that their families will choose well for them. They also believe in the long-term stability of such marriages. These marriages are, for the most part, caste-specific.

In recent times, various scholars have paid some amount of attention to trying to understand changes in family structures particularly among the educated urban middle-class of Indian society. The sociologist, B  teille (1991), argues about this group that it has shifted its 'focus of attention away from caste and sub-caste towards school, college and office'. According to him, caste and sub-caste have ceased to play an active part in the reproduction of inequality, at least at the upper levels of the social hierarchy where they are no longer important agents of either social placement or social control'. He argues that modern Indians have an ambivalent or negative attitude towards caste in general and that caste is no longer an 'institution' among them in the way that the family is. In other words, Indians of this social level do not place value on caste as they continue to do on the family. He is also inclined to think that Indians have a differing orientation towards family and caste. They can repudiate the demands of the second, but not of the first. The implication of this view would appear to be that location within familial bonds of particular kinds involves no certain adjustment to caste.

Another anthropologist, Arvind Shah (1998), has shown himself much more reluctant to write off caste from the social landscape of the modern Indian. As he cautiously reminds us, even 'modern' individuals who are ideologically averse to caste

are not averse to the 'network of relatives'. These networks of relatives along with the family or, indeed, constituting the family in its broader sense, are very important for performing the function of inculcating and enforcing caste norms in modern times. Though modern individuals may rail against caste, they are deeply loyal to the family.

In contrast to what B  teille suggests, however, the orientations to caste and the family are not fundamentally different. In fact, Shah argues that the family should be seen as including the networks of relations by kinship and marriage. When viewed as such, it emerges that networks of relatives occupy the realm *between caste and the family and enable the mediation of the two*. In other words, for a modern Indian, the most concrete representation of his/her caste is the network of kin and social relations, which constitute the core of the individual's social world. This is the group that has the moral power to exert pressure on the individual to practice caste norms and it is, therefore, extremely important in caste perpetuation. For instance, so many intra-caste marriages are arranged through informal inquiries among members of kin groups.

In modern India, the print media and the web have become important sites for the search for suitable spouses. I reproduce here some recent advertisements from a leading English-language newspaper. These show us the extent and well as the limits of change in the area of marriage.

Match for Rajput girl. Class Two Officer Maharashtrian Government MSc
Computer Science wheatish slim smart 150 cms. Born June 1971 Expectation:
Maharashtra Govt./Central Govt. Officer/MBA/Engineer from Rajput/North
Indian Brahmin/Maratha/other higher communities. Contact...

Suitable match for Delhi based Bengali Brahmin girl 26/162, fair, slim, beautiful,
smart, Executive in MNC. Boy should be from educated cultured Bengali family
(Brahmin/Baidya/Kulin Kayastha), professionally qualified and preferably in
same profession. Please write Box...

US citizen, Computer engineer, 27, good-looking, Maheshwari, vegetarian.
Proposals invited from fair, slim, good-looking, educated, well-qualified, homely

Maheshwari/Jain/Oswal/Vaishnav girls with traditional Indian values. Write Box...

Nair boy Hindu 37, 5' 11", smart fair innocently divorced, no issues, financially sound government employee born and brought up in North India, seeks alliance from good looking cultured girl divorcee and widow can also respond caste language no bar. SC ST [Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes] please excuse.

Clearly, the advertisements show that the boundaries of caste do seem to be expanding. The boundaries between castes that are close to each other in the hierarchy are collapsing and one finds the search for marriage partners going beyond the sub-caste and even the caste limits. Thus, a Maheshwari boy's family can contemplate his marriage within a group of similarly-placed castes, including Jains and Oswals. Further, a Rajput girl's family can seek to arrange her marriage into the Rajput, North Indian Brahmin, Maratha, or other higher communities. However, caste categories continue to be quite clearly mentioned and not just broader *varna* categories, or regional and religious categories. Further, the line of pollution between the so-called 'clean' and 'unclean' castes (castes belonging to the *varna* category and the *avarna* castes) remains firmly in place. Even when a divorcee seeks to enter a second union, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (former *avarna* groups) are emphatically excluded.

Some critical pieces of social legislation in modern India include the abolition of untouchability and the practice of positive discrimination in favour of former *avarna* communities. Independent India declared the untouchability of castes in any form an offence and it enforced the rights of the former *avarna* groups to enter Hindu temples as well as to draw water from wells previously limited to upper-caste use in villages. It was during British times that schedules of lower-caste communities and isolated tribal groups came to be drawn up in order to implement certain practices of reservation in their favour. These schedules came to be included in the Indian Constitution: the list of Scheduled Castes and the list of Scheduled Tribes. Reservations in education, political representation and employment have been implemented for these groups.

There has also been social legislation that radically alters the rights of women. In particular, Hindu marriage, inheritance and succession laws have been changed in order to achieve greater gender parity. There have been some changes in the personal laws applying to Muslims and Christians, but not quite as far-reaching. Among Hindus, women now bear the right to equal inheritance along with their brothers in both their father's self-acquired as well as his inherited properties. Despite such radical legislation, however, it is still true that women frequently forgo their share in property, in order to not to damage their relations with their brothers. There are still many situations in which a woman will rely for support on her brother: if she is abandoned or widowed or if her marital relationship sours. Insistence on her legal rights may compromise the possibility of such support being forthcoming.

In more contemporary times, the practice of dowry or *stridhan* has turned into something akin to a 'groom price', wherein both the nature of gifts and the amounts involved have drastically changed. Further, the groom price is decided by the groom's family and it is related to the educational and employment attainments of the groom. There is now a significant cash component involved, which was rare in the past. There have been numerous cases of what are called 'dowry deaths', in which the groom's family play a role in killing off the young bride because of insufficient dowry. Despite the fact that the giving and taking of dowry are now offences and the fact that it is mandatory for the police to investigate the death of any woman who dies within the first few years of marriage, the practice of 'groom price' does continue.

Culturally, modern India shows several contradictory developments. Everywhere, the consciousness of ethnic identity is on the rise. Fundamentalist discourses – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh as well as others – have emerged, all of which are detrimental in their implications for the role and rights of women. The reconstruction of ethnic identity and the drawing of religious boundaries involve the reinterpretation of traditions. Often traditions are sought to be imposed on the grounds that they are 'pure' traditions from the past. These, more often than not, impose certain restrictions on women, who are considered to be the bearers of the honour of ethnic groups. The dress, deportment, movement and mobility of women come under examination under the harsher cultural regimes. There has, contradictorily enough, been a renewed interest in and revival of

rituals and customs to do with life-cycle events and festivals. The media plays with and pushes along such interest. The telecast of television serials and mythologies which promote traditional culture is on the rise.

On the other hand, there is the spread of modernity, particularly in the area of capitalist, consumerist and materialist values. There are also increasing spaces available for the struggle for rights – whether those of women, of marginalized castes or other social groups. Progressive legislation as well as the belief in the ideas of democracy and judicial justice permit the questioning of the denial of rights and justice to different sections of the population. The media does not only promote religious and traditional values. The media also provides scope for the expression of new ideas of masculinity and womanhood, for speaking about issues that remained otherwise hidden, such as: domestic violence, homosexuality or gender discrimination in the workplace.

Conclusion

Whether considered socially or culturally, India is today a study in contrasts. There are the already existing divides between the rich and the poor, the upper and lower castes and men and women; these are further complicated, especially when we map them on regional and religio-cultural differences. All such differences are exacerbated in the context of relentless modernization, increasing urbanization and, above all, globalization. Globalization has increased economic inequalities and has hastened the pace of change to a degree difficult for those on the margins to cope with. As already described, contrary to expectations, globalization has not reduced religious or ethnic differences but appears to have further sharpened awareness of them.

One of the most disturbing outcomes of these tensions, which may be remarked upon here, is the increase in violence of different kinds and at different levels of society. Terrorism is but one expression, though a singularly devastating one, of such aggression on a global scale. Increasing domestic violence, caste and ethnic violence as well as forms of individual violence as ‘road rage’ are other and perhaps, given their social spread, more insidious expressions. The focus on terrorism sometimes effaces these other forms from active scrutiny or public concern. The changes in Indian society are shifting the balance of power from the sections that traditionally held it: men of the upper castes

and classes. Power is not easily yielded; it is the struggles to wrest it away from these groups that must be a critical reason for increasing social conflicts. We need to sharpen our understanding of these issues in order to think of ways to enable social change to occur in a less damaging way.

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