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Hinduism and Caste System

Mathieu Claveyrolas

Are Hinduism and Caste Consubstantial?

/p. 236/ 'Hinduism' and 'caste' are both paradigmatic examples of one major paradox haunting social sciences concerned with the Indian field. However, crucial to our understanding of India's social and cultural realities, neither of these words— that we can fairly supposed to be among the most widely used through academic literature— can be translated accurately into an Indian language. What is at stake, then, is both defining precisely what we mean when using 'Hinduism' and 'caste', and how these two notions are connected one to the other. Is the caste system Hindu? Is Hinduism necessary for the caste system to exist? Is Hinduism chiefly dependent upon this one- and-only organization (Srivivas, 1956, p. 495)? And would Hinduism inevitably disappear 'if and when caste disappears' as Srinivas also argued (Srivivas, 1956)? Is there such thing as a casteless Hinduism? In other words: to what extent are Hinduism and caste consubstantial?

Behind the misleading conceptions of Hinduism as a homogeneous category, a 'religion' shared by some 80 per cent of the Indian population, one must keep in mind the variety of Hindu practices and representations. Together with other criteria such as sectarian or regional traditions, caste affiliations are crucial to the structural diversity within Hinduism. The need to bring together such heterogeneity under a unique term and category has only grown relatively recently, boosted by colonization, and independence/ nationalist fights (Sontheimer and Kulke, 1989; Lorenzen, 1999), without radically undermining neither the diversity between castes, nor the utmost importance of the caste system in Indian social structures, daily life, and religious practices.

Caste, Hinduism, and Society

Most studies of Hindu castes rightfully start with the distinction between *varnas* and *jatis*. On the one hand, castes as *varnas* divide society into four orders: the Brahmins (religious specialists), the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), the Vaishyas (farmers and merchants), and the Shudras (servants). Such a conception of caste as *varna* is inherited from Brahminical ideology. On the other hand, castes as *jatis* divide society into thousands of inherited, endogamous social groups— a conception close to the naturalist notion of species.

Castes as *varnas* illustrate the intrinsically socio- religious dimension of Hinduism. Not only does the ability to perform certain rituals and to be initiated depend on one's *varna*, but such religious hierarchy matches a social role embedded in a truly organicist vision of society. The founding myth of *varnas* has them originate from the dismembering of the primordial being (*Purusha*)— Rig Veda hymn X/ 90: Brahmins are the mouth, Kshatriyas the arms, Vaishyas the thighs, and Shudras the feet.

Together with such social structuring supported by the caste system, another dimension of *varnas* stands for a Hindu model of the interaction between individual life and society. Best formalized in the *Bhagavad Gita* teaching of Krishna to Arjuna, the Hindu ideology demands individuals to support the cosmic order through sticking to their own, individual *dharma*, varying according to *varnas*. Kshatriyas should eat meat and make war whereas Brahmins should be non-violent vegetarians dedicated to the ritual maintenance of the cosmic order. In sharp contrast with any universal morality, the *varna* system founds Hinduism as a structuring model commanding each individual his distinct place and duty within cosmos and society.

Such holism might allow to argue in favour of a supposedly non-segregationist Hindu society, where each *varna* is necessary and complements the others, just as a human body needs all its members. In this perspective, stressing how Hinduism inevitably goes with casteism is often assimilated to a disguised strategy to divide the so-called Hindu community, to weaken its solidarity reflexes in communalist contexts. But the 'naive' apprehension of castes as harmoniously complementary is obviously missing the hierarchy guiding the system— and the shared representations considering the head (Brahmins) as the noblest part of the body and the feet (Shudras) as highly impure.

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Relative Purity or the Caste System as Founded on Hindu Ritual Ideology

Indeed, if *varnas* are structured by their relative access to sacrifice, the hierarchy also relates to the Hindu notions of ritual purity and pollution: a Shudra is not pure enough to go through the *upanayanam* (sacred thread) initiation ceremony and become a twice-born *dvija* (a category reserved to the three upper *varnas*). But the relative purity structuring the Hindu caste system is best exemplified by everyday life as governed by the subtle hierarchy of *jatis*. Not only is each individual born within a specific *jati*, not only does he marry and die within it, but *jati* comes to govern his daily interactions. The ancient regulation of the necessary distance (number of steps— Herrenschildt, 1978) to be respected between a Brahmin and a low-caste individual has been replaced by prohibition of physical contact, commensality, and exogamy. Consequently, the higher one stands in the caste hierarchy, the higher is the risk of pollution, and the subsequent precautions and taboos.

Castes as *jatis* are a relational system. The intrinsic quality (*guna*) of each *jati* is a highly transferable one, primarily through cooking (and serving) food, water, and body fluids (semen, saliva, sweat, faeces). Thus centered on purity, the *jati* identity is also linked to professional activities which, though not necessarily respected today, still retain their value as purity markers: *jatis* whose traditional occupation was dealing with leather (tanner *jati*) or hair (barber *jati*) still suffer from the polluting stigma. Focusing on individual relations and quality transfers, Hindu sacrifice has been studied through a transactional approach of castes. The payment to the ritual specialist (*dakshina*— Malamoud, 1976) can be apprehended as a transfer of inauspiciousness from the patron individual (who benefits from the ritual and pays for it) to the ritual specialist, who needs constant precautions and purification (Parry, 1986; Raheja, 1988).

Accordingly, one must not be misled by the Brahminical understanding of caste as *varna* that puts the Brahmin's archetypical occupation as ritual specialists on top of the social hierarchy. Brahmins are far from being a uniform *varna*-community, and the main criterion ruling hierarchy among them is precisely the public ritual service. For a Brahmin, working in a public temple indeed means enjoying the closest access to the divine, but it also means officiating for clients of various statuses, resulting in lower prestige than other Brahmins without ritual duties (Fuller, 1984). And when in charge of highly

impure ritual activities, the Brahmin specialist can even be ‘treated like an Untouchable’ such as with funeral priests officiating in Banaras (Parry, 1994, p. 3).

Such relational dimension of the caste system goes hand in hand with a certain flexibility, depending on individual, or collective strategies. The system’s flexibility builds on a long history of *jati* merging or dividing dynamics accompanied by adjustments at the level of the ritual traditions each new *jati* chooses to follow. Again, the key- issues are relational: more than ‘what can I eat?’, the question raised is ‘who can I eat with?’, and /p. 238/ ‘who cooks what I eat?’ While most daily prohibitions are unescapable in public, many are relieved in private settings— a point that counts for the global easing of caste rules in urban contexts. Moreover, even the most polluting activities can be justified for the sake of the whole system. According to this *apad- dharma*, the caste- bound rule one has to follow in times of crises, even the Brahmin individual is allowed (even asked) to eat dog flesh in case of extreme starvation in order to avoid the greatest of loss: the death of Brahmins and the subsequent impossibility to perpetuate the holist caste- system. Other solutions to failure to respect caste prohibitions are rooted in the Hindu logics of ritual purification. Specific rituals (*dana*- gift, purifying bath, head shave, or *mantra japa*- recitation, for instance) and engaging in pilgrimage (*tirthayatra*) are expiation rites (*prayacita*) allowing correction of most caste- wise issues.

Castes in Hindu Temples and Villages

Ritual practices link castes with Hinduism through the complex relational ideology of purity. The *varna* logics misleadingly posits that Brahmins have the monopoly of priestly functions— notwithstanding the many lower caste ritual specialists officiating all over India’s Hindu homes, shrines, and ceremonies. As a matter of fact, Hindu ritual traditions widely differ according to castes, and Hindu mythology and pantheon are pervaded by caste considerations (Bouillier and Toffin, 1993). A kind of ritual labour division links Hindu deities and castes: a Brahmin individual can be made to turn towards a low-caste ritual specialist, for instance when facing a danger identified with a spirit only an exorcist is able to deal with. If ritual activities are distinct between higher and lower castes, they can also be complementary, when Dalits are traditionally required to beat the drums during funeral processions, for instance. But then again, the complementarity reading is contested by those who live it as segregation and choose to protest through renouncing their traditional caste ritual attributions (Clark-Décès, 2008).

Within Hindu temples, the social hierarchy along criteria of contact, distance, and ingestion governs both the spatial organization and the ritual pre-eminence rules. Besides the ban for Untouchables to enter high- caste premises, Hindu temples replicate the caste hierarchy and pollution rules through concentric circles (from *garbhagriha* to *mandapa* and surrounding spaces) restricting the approach of the divine according to castes. Enjoying the *prasad* (gods’ leftovers of the offerings) can also be reserved to higher castes, or handed out in a specific order.

Beyond temples, Hindu castes and religious practices are jointly rooted in the village territory. The spatial organization according to castes in village India is still widely ordered by the local religious topography. Most village Hindu temples follow caste lines (or groups of assimilated castes): they are situated in a caste- specific neighbourhood, whose caste members generally provide for the devotees, the local priest, and the foremost patrons (Reiniche, 1979; Trouillet, 2008). But the village caste system should also be studied through the relational network linking each individual /p. 239/ god, temple, and community with those of other (caste- specific) neighbourhoods. Religious circulations such as processions typically reinstate socio- spatial dynamics, sacralizing caste neighbourhoods as divine

jurisdictions— *kshetra* (Berti and Tarabout, 2009). The various village rituals express the sociological unity of the village, and ritual changes typically accompany new adjustments in the village inter- caste relations (Herrenschmidt, 2016).

True enough, with economic changes since several decades and Brahmins widely leaving the villages, some Shudras have become locally dominant castes. But one should not conclude that Hindu ritual hierarchy has totally disappeared. The influence of Hindu ideology in daily caste matters is still pervasive in the village spatial segregation of former Untouchables (“those who cannot be *touched*”) neighbourhoods. Most other enduring prohibitions (the right to use the village cremation ground, or the village well), and the most common humiliating punishments for lower caste individuals who fail to comply (having someone wear his shoes on his head) reinstate ritual criteria (Herrenschmidt, 2014).

How Caste Issues Interact with the Definition of Hinduism

As a historically contingent category, Hinduism has been constantly redefined according to its relations with castes, moving from a synonym of Brahminism (when the orientalist perspective excludes lower caste practices, and representations from the realm of ‘Hinduism’) to an inclusive continuum of heterogeneous traditions.

Strictly speaking, besides being segregated as polluting individuals, Dalits are deprived of castes as *varnas* (they are *a- varna*), a conception which has long kept them outside Hinduism. Still today, Dalit activists regularly use the phrase ‘caste Hindus’ to refer to those with *varnas* (*sa- varna*). The ‘world of caste’ also builds on the opposition with non- Hindu tribal groups, a dichotomy again reified by British administrators and their Brahmin sources (Bayly, 1999). But the political stakes behind the definition of the frontiers of Hinduism have also contributed to strategically *include* groups formerly considered to be non- Hindus. During the 19th- century mobilization for Independence, the need for a unifying category against the British, and the positioning against other religions for census and electoral purposes, gradually led to the inclusion of lower castes into the Hindu community (Roberts, 2016). But the outcome of a Hindu consciousness among Dalits remains debatable (Ilaiah, 1996). Viramma, the Pariah woman whose life story vividly acknowledges the subjective experience of lower castes, hesitates when articulating Untouchability and Hinduness: ‘Who are the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians, that, I don’t know for sure . . . Hindus must be the name of a caste. Wait, I think I heard it once: the Hindu people, it is us, the Poor, who are called like that in the speeches’ (Viramma and Racine, 1994, p. 203). /p. 240/

Indeed, if politically- motivated inclusion processes favoured an understanding of Hinduism as shared by *sa- varnas* and *a- varnas*, they also reinstated caste hierarchy, and segregation as central to Hinduism. The national debate over the ban for Untouchables to enter government- led Hindu temples (first lifted in 1936) has long aroused sometimes violent opposition from higher castes. When the police forced Varanasi Brahmins to let Untouchables enter the Vishwanath temple in 1956, local orthodox Hindus considered that such an issue rendered the Shiva *linga* impure, and decided to build another, private, 'New Vishwanath temple' (Eck, 1998, p. 135). And when, in 1936, Gandhi inaugurated the Banaras Bharat Mata (Mother India) *mandir*, a temple/ museum with a marble map of India standing in place of the main *murti*— divine image (Claveyrolas, 2008), he tried to articulate national unity, and an egalitarian Hinduism beyond caste divisions: 'In this temple, there is no statue of gods or goddesses. I hope this temple will play the role of a universal platform for all religions, as well as for *harijan* [untouchables] and for all castes and creeds, and that it will contribute to the sentiments of religious unity, peace and love in this country' (quoted in Gupta, 2001, p. 4292). But the Gandhian ecumenism does not contest caste hierarchy and its Hindu ritual purity criteria: during the Bharat Mata temple's inauguration, so-called 'sons of god' (*harijans*) were handed out pieces of soap in order to 'wash' before being allowed to share the common meal with other participants (Gupta, 2001) . . . The anecdote reveals the deep discomfort of Westernized Indian nationalist elites regarding the ritually sanctioned hierarchy of castes.

Moreover, such focus on castes as an all- inclusive system, ambiguously associated with tolerance as a supposedly Hindu virtue (Halbfass, 1988), often comes back to strengthening the equation between Hinduism and Brahmanism. Hence *sanskritization* strategies (Srinivas, 1956) implemented by those who fight caste segregation within Hinduism: they typically comply with the Brahminical hierarchy, giving up low-caste 'impure' practices (blood sacrifice, meat, and alcohol offerings, trance) to adopt higher caste 'pure' traditions (vegetarianism)— thus hoping to be granted a higher status.

Castes, Domination, and Conversion

Focusing on the Hindu ritual ideology of purity and pollution as the major dimension of the caste system and Indian society, such as in Dumont's (1966) influential theory, has been criticized as a Brahminical bias. Following McKim Marriott's first counter- model (1959) stressing rank rather than purity issues, most recent studies have looked at caste in terms of power and domination (Guha, 2013; Mosse, 2012; Roberts, 2016; Viswanath, 2014). They argue in favour of a more horizontal reading of castes, insisting on non- religious dimensions such as socio- political subordination or empowerment, and electoral lobbies (Jaffrelot, 2005). Such analyses favour castes as bounded communities, with relations and hierarchies focused on the access to resources and power— untied by either ritual ideology or Hinduism *per se*. /p. 241/

Again contrasting with the argument of an intrinsically Hindu- bound ideology, subaltern studies also argued in favour of an initially far more flexible system, only solidified in colonial times by the British taxonomic obsession and 'divide- and- rule' strategies (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001). The representations of the caste system, and of its relations with Hinduism, have indeed greatly evolved during this period, including through the manipulations of Independent leaders eager to put forward a Hindu majority by including Dalits in this category. Following Independence, the Hindu socio- ritual caste system was once thought to be bound to disappear with the advent of modernity, globalization, and urbanization. Though caste rules are more constraining in villages (still the vast majority of Indian population), such hypothesis has long been abandoned. Castes have shown perfectly compatible with social classes: the

two different logics somehow join, with social handicaps (poverty, poor access to health, or education) more often than not coupled with ritual lower statuses (Roberts, 2016). Meant to fight such segregation, the quota reservation system has also been decisive in the resilience of caste consciousness and in the legal definition of caste restricted to Hindus (quotas exclude Christian *Other Backward Classes*, for instance).

One of the strongest illustrations of the Indian assimilation of the complex relations of castes to Hinduism lies in the fact that many castes fighting against their segregation finally chose to convert to Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity. Escaping castes through leaving Hinduism seems to confirm that there cannot be a casteless Hinduism. Such perception of how the caste system directly stems from Hinduism— and of the Hindu nature of low-caste oppression— eventually led the ‘Father of the Indian Constitution’ Ambedkar to convert to Buddhism, thirty years after having publicly burnt (in 1927) the *Laws of Manu*, the *Dharmashastra* text in which the Sage Manu exposes caste rules.

The existence of castes outside Hindu communities is supposed to uphold the so-called Hindu-bias reading of India through the Dumontian theory. Yet, one must keep in mind that such (individual or, rather, collective) conversions rarely put an end to segregation. In fact, if the *jati* hierarchy is flexible and has never been written down for eternity, it remains a relational matter, depending on how others evaluate your relative purity, and consequently engage with you on a daily basis. Indeed, neither Indian Christianity nor Indian Islam can be understood without a close look at their internal caste relations and hierarchy, and at their relations with Hindu castes (Clémentin-Ojha, 2008). Barely changing such relational prospects, conversion cases stress how non-Hindu religions have never been able to go beyond caste domination. Indian Catholicism, for instance, replicated caste hierarchies, even if it fought the religious sanction structuring the caste system, and also contributed in developing a language for social contestation (Mosse, 2012). Moreover, when part of a caste converts to Catholicism for instance, inter-religious marriages do happen, but only as long as caste endogamy prevails.

Beyond the (ritual-religious or political) focus chosen to tackle caste issues, caste stands at the crossroads of various classification systems (referring to religious or kinship terminologies and structures), and various domination systems (whether be it class or gender, for instance— Ghosh & Banerjee, 2018). Hence sometimes confusing /p. 242/ identities. If *hijra* individuals are first defined by their gender (transsexual) identity, they are also Hindus or Muslims, and can be from upper or lower castes (Boisvert, 2018). Adding a high-caste patronym to one’s name is a common strategy to support upward pretensions of one’s family or community, without contesting the caste system. And, an individual from the Jat caste can be a Hindu, a Sikh, or a Muslim; a member of lower castes and a member of the locally dominant class and caste.

A Casteless Hinduism? Challenges to Caste Within Hinduism

Besides lower castes fighting the system’s hierarchy, the caste logics is first challenged within Hinduism itself through ascetic individuals and institutions. The caste system has been studied as grounded in the dialectical relation between the world of castes— those householders engaging in actions according to their relative *dharma* (*varnashramadharmā*)— and renunciation— those ascetic individuals renouncing not only worldly possessions but the whole world of caste. Though in a sense paradigmatic Hindus, renouncers are dead to their caste: they performed their own death ritual, they are freed from its rules and duties, away from the otherwise unescapable fruits of actions and rituals (Dumont, 1966; Madan, 1988).

With renunciation also comes a challenge to the very necessity of castes for Hinduism to exist. Even if only temporarily and as a theoretical model, the ever-growing numbers of Hindu pilgrims replicate the quest for salvation apart from the world of caste, engaging in a caste-free devotional experience. Matching Turner's *communitas* model, the ideal Hindu pilgrim experience is indeed egalitarian, setting pilgrims free from sociological categories, and constraints (Claveyrolas, 2016). But ethnographical data on actual pilgrim experiences show how this ideal, indeed crucial to the pilgrims' own representations, is hardly consistent with the daily organization of pilgrimage. Pilgrims generally travel with their kins or fellow villagers, making it uneasy to go beyond caste matters (Gold, 1988; Karve, 1988; Lochtefeld, 2010). Furthermore, they are usually housed and ritually guided by pilgrim priests (*panda*) who have been maintaining hereditary patronage (*jajmani*) relations with their fellow-caste members for generations—guaranteeing that basic interaction and commensality rules are still respected during the time of pilgrimage. Even if the kind of priest the pilgrim chooses has come to depend more and more on market rules, pilgrim groups remain rather homogeneous in terms of caste status (Van der Veer, 1988).

Bhakti, a strong contestation of castes in itself, is another reference fuelling Hindu pilgrimage. Devotional (*bhakti*) traditions, starting around the 5th century AD, have regularly put forward anti-Brahmanical ideologies. Targeting the Brahmins' monopoly of ritual, technical mediation, *bhakti* movements have argued in favour of an un-mediated, emotional relation to divinity (Bennett, 1993; Lynch, 1990). In sharp contrast with the **/p. 243/** *varna* theory, Hindu *bhakti* introduces a 'universal' possibility to reach god and salvation whatever the caste you belong to. Such a move towards universality can also be witnessed in most modern sectarian traditions based on individual gurus and lineages, often replacing, in theory if not in practice, caste-bound ritualism by a caste-free individual devotion. From the 19th-century Arya Samaj to contemporary *guru*-led sectarian movements, caste-free Hinduism is often linked with the promotion of the Indian unity around Hindutva nationalistic ideology, thus bringing back the potential contestation of castes within Hinduism, again understood as all-inclusive and relevant to both social and religious matters.

The Resilience of Caste in Overseas Hindu Communities

One of the most crucial challenges to both the caste system and the apprehension of its link to Hinduism has lied in its outcome in Indian overseas communities— an issue that crystallized the academic interest soon after the Indian diaspora studies first developed (Schwartz, 1967). The issues raised were three-fold: first, that of the possibility/ transformation of Hinduism when it leaves its Indian mother-land; second, that of the resilience of the holistic caste system when only some of the individual castes are exported; third, that of the possible emergence of a casteless Hinduism.

As soon as the late 19th century, Bengal witnessed a crucial debate over the consequences faced by high-caste Hindus leaving the Indian sacred territory (*dharma-bhumi*) and crossing the ocean's dark waters (*kalapani*) to study, work, or fight in far-away lands (Clémentin-Ojha, 2016). Risking exclusion from their caste, such individuals concretely experimented the possibility of being Hindu in a context where India's caste system and regulations could no longer be respected. For (mainly low-castes) Hindu indentured labourers contracted to work in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, or Pacific sugar-colonies in the second part of the 19th century, two major challenges to caste persistence are generally stressed: the un-controlled commensality and promiscuity beyond caste barriers during the boat passage, and the disruption of purity regulations ruling endogamy, residence, and work specialization once installed in the colony.

Most studies conclude that while castes still exist in today's communities installed in diaspora or descending from the indentured labourers, the caste *system*, structured by the ideology of purity has waned, or even disintegrated (Hollup, 1994) in favour of a joint brahminization and ethnicization of the system (Van der Veer & Vertovec, 1991). Interestingly, together with stressing the disappearance of purity matters guiding most daily interactions, few of these studies would contest the resilience of caste rules when it comes to marriage and, sometimes, commensality, and ritual matters (Claveyrolas, 2015). Diaspora studies hence open the door to the possible compatibility of castes with overseas Hinduism. /p. 244/

The Dumontian reading of the caste system as founded by the Hindu ritual ideology has been the target of most alternative studies of castes insisting on non- religious (non- Hindu) dimensions in a sometimes too radical swing of the pendulum. It may well be fair to argue that, half a century after Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*, castes as a Hindu system initially born out of a Brahminical socio- ritual ideology but pervading the Indian society well beyond upper castes, still stand as a major, if not exclusive, entry-point into Indian society.

As a concluding attempt, let us answer our original interrogation, and argue that castes and Hinduism are indeed, to a great extent, consubstantial. On the one hand, except for marginal or dialectical contexts (renouncement), castelessness in mainstream Hinduism is limited to ideological theories (*bhakti*), and attempts (sects)— more often than not contradicted by actual practices (sects, pilgrimage). On the other hand, castes in India cannot be considered without Hinduism because caste hierarchy, daily practices, and social rules are all directly rooted in an overarching, inextricably social, and ritual, Hindu ideology.

Certainly not the only category relevant to the anthropology of Hinduism and the sociology of India, caste remains a crucial issue because the system is as pervasive as it is flexible, able to transform, and adapt to new contexts. No wonder, then, that castes have been able to prevail at the very core of the Indian society, but also to grow both beyond the limits of Hinduism (see castes in Indian Islam or Christianity), beyond the limits of religious matters (see social contestation movements and political lobbying based on caste affiliations), and beyond the Indian territory and society (see diasporic contexts). Rather than negating the fact that caste is consubstantial to Hinduism, such extensions of the realm of caste actually confirm the enduring relevance of the religious dimension of caste, as all the new avatars of caste have indeed perpetuated the core principle of Hindu ritual ideology: the distinction between the pure and the impure.

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