

# VARNA AND JATI

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I Would like to use the present occasion to discuss some important changes taking place in the caste system in our time. The focus of attention will be on caste as a system of representations, and I would like to justify my approach by referring you to Durkheim whose view was that social facts are things, but they are also, and at the same time, representations.

The social morphology of caste continues to be one of its important features. The division of Indian society into innumerable castes and communities has been noted by the many Backward Classes Commissions set up in independent India, and Mr. Mandal's commission listed as many as three thousand seven hundred and forty three. More recently, the monumental People of India project undertaken by the Anthropological Survey of India has drawn public attention to the continuing significance of the divisions of caste and subcaste in contemporary India. But I will dwell less on these divisions and subdivisions themselves than on the ways in which they are perceived, particularly among the intelligentsia whose role in contemporary Indian society should not be discounted.

My argument is a simple one. In the classical literature of India, caste was represented as *varna* and for two thousand years, when Hindus wrote about it, they did so characteristically in the idiom of *varna*. This is no longer the case and caste is now represented much more typically as *jati*, or its equivalent in the regional language. This displacement of *varna* by *jati* indicates much more than a simple linguistic shift. It indicates a change of perception, a change in the meaning and legitimacy of caste even among those who continue to abide by the constraints imposed by its morphology on marriage and other matters. This change

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has not as yet received the systematic attention from sociologists that is its due.

## I

It is a truism that caste is not merely a form of identity, arising from birth in a particular group; it is also a matter of consciousness. It was believed by many at the time of independence that with economic and political development, with a secular Constitution and with the spread of education and a scientific outlook, the consciousness of caste would decline or disappear, at least from public view. It is quite evident that caste consciousness has not disappeared, and many would even question that it has declined. But what we have today is a somewhat different kind of consciousness, with *jati* rather than *varna* in the foreground.

I do not wish to suggest that the consciousness of *jati*, or the idea of it is a new one, only that it had a subordinate place in representations of the caste system. Much of the reality of everyday life must have turned around the divisions and subdivisions of *jati*. It may have been the case even in the distant—as in the more recent—past that peasants, artisans and labourers gave little thought to the larger scheme of things expressed by the concept of *varna*. My attention today is on India's long intellectual tradition. Within that tradition, the literati, those who reflected on what we call caste today, and wrote about it, represented it in the idiom of *varna* rather than *jati*. When their contemporary counterparts write and speak about it, they make use of a different idiom.

I would like to turn now to the path-breaking essay by M. N. Srinivas (1962: 63-69) called 'Varna and Caste' published forty years ago. It may be noted that the title pre-empts, at least by implication, the term caste for the designation of *Jati*. Srinivas was reacting against the Indological representation of caste as *varna* which he felt gave a distorted view of the Indian reality: 'The *varna*-model has produced a wrong and distorted image of caste. It is necessary for the sociologist to free himself from the hold of the *varna-model* if he wishes to understand the caste system' (Ibid.: 66). My point is that Indians are in fact freeing themselves from the hold of that model. The conditions under which this disengagement is taking place were not discussed by Srinivas, but they merit serious attention.

Srinivas's impatience with the varca-model was a response to the dominance in Indian writing about society of what he called the 'book-view' which he was eager to replace with the 'field-view'. He pointed out, with great success, that the way people actually live is very different from how they are supposed to live, and that sociologists should concentrate on the former and not the latter. This was true of the Indian village community, the Indian joint family and, of course, also of caste. But then, people everywhere have some conception of how they ought to live. Today in particular, they are acutely aware that they do not always live as they ought to do, and it would be a mistake for the sociologist to ignore how people think they ought to live, and dwell only on how they actually live. It is in this sense that I consider representations to be an important part of the social reality.

No matter how we argue, we cannot turn our back on the book-view of Indian society which may be regarded as a particular form of collective representations. Of course, collective representations have to be studied even where there is no book-view, as Durkheim did in his work on the Australian Aboriginals who had no book, hence no book-view. But India is not just an aggregate of tribal and peasant communities. It is and has been a major civilization in which the book-view, or, rather, different and even competing book-views have existed for two thousand years and more. The social reality on the ground rarely changes without some change in collective representations; and when those change, the book-view also undergoes change.

Just as the social reality on the ground and its morphological framework change, so also do collective representations and the authoritative texts in which they are encoded. The authoritative texts of the past no longer enjoy their old authority today. Their influence has declined, although it has by no means disappeared. Here it is useful to remember that the late Professor P. V. Kane found a place for the Constitution of India in his monumental work on the history of Dharmashastra. Nor am I talking only of the Dharmashastra, with or without inclusion of the Constitution. Today, the book-view of Indian society may be found in a variety of texts: legislative debates, judicial decisions, political manifestos, essays, pamphlets and books of a great variety of types. Caste figures in many of these documents, but it figures

more commonly as *jati* than as *varna*, in contrast with the ancient and medieval texts.

Sifting this vast and amorphous mass of material for convincing evidence of a clear direction of change in the social perception of caste is no easy task. It is not something that can be accomplished single-handedly by any individual scholar. I cannot say that I have even made a proper beginning of a systematic enquiry. The only point I would like to make very briefly here is that the really crucial evidence of the shift in representations of caste will be found not in English but in the Indian languages. I can claim some competence in only one of those languages, namely Bengali, and I have been struck for some time that Bengalis, particularly of the younger generation, hardly use the term *varna* or (*barna*) in either speech or writing. Casual enquiries from those whose mother tongue is Hindi seem to indicate that something similar is happening there as well; beyond that, I am not able to even suggest anything further.

The idiom of *varna* has no doubt been used extensively in the present century in the process of upward social mobility described as Sanskritization (Srinivas 1966). It is possible that the new opportunities provided by censuses and ethnographic surveys since the end of the 19th century may even have revived to some extent the language of *varna* among groups aspiring to upward social mobility. But the impression is that this trend reached its peak in the earlier part of the present century and is now on the decline. When so many castes with manifestly inappropriate antecedents claim that they are Kshatriyas, the category itself is bound to become devalued. Where sixty years ago a caste would claim to be Kshatriya, today the same caste might prefer to be designated as backward. This is not a change of small significance.

Srinivas seemed to suggest that there was an error in describing caste as *varna* and that it should be described as *jati*. My view is that this is not just a recognition of error, but also a response to change. A decade before the publication of Srinivas's paper on *varna* and caste, the social historian Niharranjan Ray (1945) published a book in Bengali entitled *Bangali Hindur Barnabhed*, meaning caste among the Bengali Hindus. Similarly, the anthropologist, N. K. Bose, who wrote much in Bengali (1949a; 1949b; 1975), often for literary magazines, freely used the term *barna* in describing caste. There is a repertoire of terms relating to *varna*

or *barna*: *barnabyabastha*, the affairs of caste; *barnabinyas*, the arrangement of castes; *asabarnabibaha*, inter-caste marriage; *barnasankar*, offspring of mixed unions; and so on. My impression is that these terms are now far less commonly used among Bengalis than in the thirties and forties.

What appears remarkable in retrospect is the continuing use of this language in a social context that was making its categories obsolete. Bose, in particular, was tireless in pointing to the forces that were disrupting the design of traditional Hindu society. Both he and Ray were well aware that the actual divisions of Bengali Hindu society did not fit at all well into the traditional scheme of *varnas*: there were only Brahmins among the three upper *varnas*, the rest being in some sense or other Shudras. Such has been the actual state of affairs for decades or even centuries, yet the old language continued in use right until our own time.

Much of Bose's description in fact related to such functional castes and subcastes as Telis, Kumhars, Lohars, and so on, which he would certainly recognize as *jatis*; yet he commonly used the language of *varna* to refer to such general features of their social arrangement as division of labour, rules of marriage, and so on. One of the reasons in his case might have been his interest in the distinction between tribe and caste, and in what he called the Hindu method of tribal absorption (Bose 1941). He repeatedly argued that Hindu society had a distinct design, and that non-Hindus, from both within and outside, had fitted themselves into it. He continued to use the language of *varna* because of his interest in that design even while he pointed out that it was being undermined by internal and external pressures to an extent that had no precedent in the country's history.

Srinivas (1962: 69) said at the end of his brief essay: '*Varna* has provided a common social language which holds good or is thought to hold good, for India as a whole.' What I am arguing here is that it is this language that is now, before our eyes, becoming obsolete and anachronistic. When Bengalis speak or write about caste, they no longer use *barna* as commonly as before, but *jat* in the spoken language, and also *jati* in the written form. Their experience and perception of caste has changed, and this change is expressed in the shift of vocabulary.

When I discuss the caste system with young, educated, upper-caste

Bengalis now, I am struck by their lack of familiarity with the old vocabulary pertaining to inter-caste marriage, hypergamy, offspring of mixed unions and so on. Part of this is due to the reduced attention paid in schools to the teaching of Sanskrit which was the basis of Bengali grammar and etymology; another part is due to the obsolescence, or at least the attenuation, of an old social code which upper-caste Bengali children imbibed at home without conscious effort; and part of it is due to a shift of attention brought about by the enlarged role of caste in politics.

Both *varna* and *jati* are polysemic terms, and therefore it is natural that there should be a large overlap of meaning between the two. Many writers on the subject took colour to be the primary meaning of *varna*, and sought its origin in the distinction between the light-skinned Aryas and the dark-skinned indigenous population (Ghurye 1950; Srinivas 1962: 63-69). But Mrs. Karve (1968: 50-52) rightly pointed out that the term had other connotations in the early sacred literature and grammatical works. It is best to adopt her suggestion to use the word *varna* in the sense of hierarchical order, and to refer to the four *varnas* as the four orders of society. This would be in conformity with the European usage which spoke of the orders of society, or the three orders or estates (Duby 1980). That usage continued in the English language until late; Adam Smith, for instance, spoke of orders rather than classes. It was only in the 19th century that the concept of order was displaced by that of classes in response to major changes in society.

N. K. Bose drew attention to the varieties of categories to which the concept of *varna* was applied. He wrote: 'The division into *varna* is not confined to human society; it is widely known that even lands or temples are classified into Brahmin, Kshatriya and so on' (1975: 91). Earlier he dwelt in particular on the classification of temples into *varnas* (Bose 1964). He concluded, 'In effect we may regard the *varna* system as a particular method for dividing into classes various kinds of phenomena, beginning with human society' (1975: 91). It was, in other words, the pre-eminent scheme of social classification established by Hindu cosmology.

Conceptually, the order of *varnas* is not only exclusive, it is also exhaustive. The Dharmashastra says Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, these are the four *varnas* and there is no fifth; this means that in

principle all of mankind can be fitted into one or other of the four *varnas*. According to Bose, this was regularly done in the past when *varna* was an active principle of social classification. 'Whenever in ancient India men came in contact with different communities, they tried to find a place for them in one or another *varna* according to their qualities and actions' (1975: 91). *Varna* has ceased to be an active principle of social classification; it has been displaced by other principles.

It is obvious that *varna* did not cease to play an active part in the arrangement and rearrangement of groups in society all at once. What is now happening seems to be the culmination of a very long and tortuous process. When the British established their empire in India, the new rulers could no longer be accommodated within the scheme of *varnas*: here one might find significant differences between British India and the princely states. The process had started earlier, with the Islamic conquest, although Muslim rulers adapted themselves to the Indian social climate much better than their European successors. Nevertheless, both Muslims and Europeans had other models of rulership, and where their authority became established, the category of Kshatriyas inevitably became emptied of some of its meaning.

Where large sections of the population became converted to Islam, as in the Punjab and Bengal, it became difficult to fit those sections into the scheme of the four *varnas*. To the extent that social divisions such as those between Rajputs, Jats and Ahirs survived the conversion to Islam, some continuity with the old forms of representation was maintained. People recognized the gaps and inconsistencies, but still used the language of *varna* in writing about caste.

## II

The idea of *jati* is also an old one and has been used, along with that of *varna*, for a very long time to refer to caste. But the connotations of the two have perhaps always been a little different. The *term jati* refers more to the units that constituted the system—the castes and communities—than to the system viewed as a whole. It did not provide the kind of basis for a universal social classification that *varna* did. Unlike the *varnas*, the *jatis* were not thought of as being exhaustive in a formal sense. We have

noted that the Dharmashastra named the four *varnas*, and said that there was no fifth. One cannot draw up a complete list of all the multifarious *jatis* and declare categorically that none exists besides those listed. New *jatis* could always be added on, but not new *varnas*.

Perhaps the term *jati* has been used more commonly than the term *varna* for a very long time. It is also a polysemic term, and I am suggesting that today it can be stretched to accommodate all kinds of units that cannot be accommodated by *varna*. For instance, it would be strange to describe the Muslims as a *varna* or a segment of a *varna*, whereas it is common to hear them being described as a *jati*; their subdivisions, whether of the sect or the caste type, may also be described as *jatis*. There being no fixed number of *jatis*, the word allows itself to be used for denoting a group as well as a subdivision of it.

Whereas *varna* refers primarily to order and classification, the primary reference of *jati* is to birth and the social identity ascribed by birth. It is thought of as a natural kind whose members share a common substance, although the sense of that may be weak or strong, depending on how broadly the group is conceived. *Jatis*, unlike classes, are thought of as organic divisions, self-generated and self-reproducing.

The term *jati* is, if anything, even more elastic than its counterpart, *varna*. It may refer to a very small group, such as a subcaste or a sub-subcaste; it may refer also to the whole of humanity. Bengalis speak commonly of the Sadgope or the Kayastha *jati*, but also of *manabjati* or *manushyajati*. In current Bengali usage, the term may be applied to Europeans, Germans, American Blacks, Muslims, Madrasis (meaning south Indians) or Punjabis. The idea always is that the members of a *jati* share some qualities in common which give them a distinctive identity that is somehow present even when it is not visible. Men and women may be referred to separately as *jatis*—*strijati* and *purushjati*—but not, so far as I am aware, capitalists and workers.

Anyone who has tried to conduct an ethnographic census among Bengalis in the Bengali language will know how frustrating it can be to secure comparable information on caste. The entries under that column frequently contain such items as Jain, Oriya, Sayyad, Sikh, Adivasi, Santal, and so on, in addition to the names of castes as understood in the sociological literature. Census-takers with tidy minds have always found this to be a nightmare.

Every anthropologist has at one time or another been outwitted by his informants, and I too have my own tale of woes. When during my fieldwork in Burdwan, I asked my informants to which *jati* they belonged, some of them naturally put the same question back to me. The answer that I did not belong to any *jati* was rarely taken seriously. Puzzled by my name, they would ask whether I was not in fact a Bengali. When I pointed out that that had to do with my mother tongue, not my caste, they would say, 'Ah, then you are a Christian.' If I denied that, a sarcastic bystander might ask, "Then I suppose you are a Frenchman?" The point is that my informants—and indeed many of my Bengali friends—believed that if I could not say that I was a Brahmin or a Kayastha, I should admit to being a Bengali, if not that, at least to being a Christian. Practically anything might serve; what does not serve is not having any *jati* at all.

It is true that even today, the vast majority of Indians think of a person without a *jati* as an anomaly; indeed, they suspect that such a person probably has something to hide. At the same time, it must be recognized that *jati* here includes other kinds of units besides those that are listed and ranked as castes in works of ethnography. In this wider sense, *jatis* are not always or necessarily ranked. Many upper caste Bengali Hindus speak of Bengalis (meaning Bengali Hindus) and Muslims (including Muslim Bengalis) or Christians (including Christian Bengalis) as different *jatis*, but that does not mean that they think that Hindus, Muslims and Christians are unequally ranked. Similarly, when they speak of Oriyajati and Telugujati, they think of them as different rather than unequal.

At first sight, such units as Brahmins, Sadgopes, Muslims, Bagdis, Oriyas and Santals appear to be extremely heterogeneous. They cannot be thought of as the differentiated parts of any kind of system based on the division of religious functions. Hence they cannot be thought of as *varnas* or fitted into the order of *varnas*. But such units are precisely the ones that are increasingly competing with each other in the political process. In Bengal certainly, and perhaps in other parts of the country as well, when people think about caste today, they think less about religion than about politics. Hence they find it more natural to represent caste as *jati* than as *varna*.

In the sixties, some anthropologists argued that when castes compete

with each other in the political arena, they act in contravention of caste principles (Leach 1960). One might perhaps say this about caste in the sense of *varna* but hardly about caste in the sense of *jati*. The competition for power between castes and between coalitions of castes and communities is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of contemporary Indian politics. Here it would be misleading to represent the contending parties as *varnas*, but quite appropriate to describe them as *jatis*. The order of *varnas* necessarily entails a hierarchy of ranks, whereas the competition for power takes place between equals, or near equals. What one caste lacks in ritual status, it may make up by strength of numbers; where its members are wanting in educational attainments, they may advance through superior capacity for organization.

Castes have become increasingly involved in politics, but they have not ceased to be castes (Beteille 1969). Electoral politics increases the consciousness of caste, and at the same time creates networks of relations across caste (Srinivas and Beteille 1964). The old cleavages between castes are continuously redefined by the formation of new coalitions among them. The sense of a common identity defined by birth and of a shared substance among members of the same caste provides a strong basis for the mobilization of electoral support (Kothari 1970). At the same time, the momentum of democratic politics creates coalitions between all kinds of groups, only some of which can be plausibly related to the traditional order of *varnas*.

All these different types of groups—castes, tribes, sects, denominations, religious and linguistic minorities—may, depending on context and situation, be designated as *jatis*. There is little sign of any decline in their active participation in the competition for scarce resources. Nor are they active only in politics. We shall presently see how attachment to the group also provides a sense of economic security to its individual members.

I have pointed out that all these various groups—those listed by Mr. Mandal's Commission and those being catalogued by the Anthropological Survey of India—may be called *jatis*, at least in the Bengali language. But can they all be legitimately designated in the English language as castes? There appears to be a problem of translation here. The term caste answers only partly but not fully to what Bengalis mean by *jat* or *jati*, which may refer also, according to context and

situation, to tribe, sect, and religious or linguistic minority. It is in this light that we have to view the increasing use of such terms as ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic group by sociologists and others to describe a significant feature of contemporary Indian society and politics. I am not suggesting that these are the most suitable terms, but they seem to answer better than the term caste to the mixed bag of social groupings to which I have been drawing attention.

Recently, Professor Srinivas has observed, 'In the future too caste will remain important in Indian life. But it will be conceived more in terms of ethnicity' (Padgaonkar 1993). That sums up very nicely what I am now trying to say. Those who had feared that the organic unity of society represented by the order of *varnas* would be disrupted by the new economic and political forces have had their fears confirmed, for it has become increasingly difficult to use *varna* as a standard of reference for describing the relations between castes. But those who had hoped that the new economic and political forces would lead to the demise of caste also have had their hopes belied, for the collective identities represented by the idea of *jati* have shown remarkable tenacity.

Writing in the twenties and thirties, Mahatma Gandhi (1962) represented the moral order of Hindu society in terms of *varna*, and still hoped that it could be revived and renovated for the benefit of all. It is that memory, filtered no doubt through rose-tinted glasses, that lingered in the minds of many Hindu intellectuals who wrote about caste until almost the time of independence. Today, it is difficult to invoke even the memory of a moral order in writing and speaking about caste.

When people now write about caste, they do not write about morality but about politics, the two being viewed as widely different, if not opposed in their nature. But is not loyalty to the community of one's birth, whether viewed in terms of language, religion, caste, sect or tribe, itself a moral fact in the sense given to the term by Durkheim? Here, the matter is somewhat complex because while people might concede that loyalty to language, religion, sect or even tribe may be legitimate, they seem less prepared to make the same concession for loyalty to caste. The reason for this is that no matter how strong the pull of collective loyalties may be, our Constitution and our laws give primacy to the rights of the individual. Those rights might be required to accommodate the claims of religion and culture to some extent, but it is difficult to see

why they should yield to the demands of caste which seems merely to divide without providing anything beyond some undefined sense of security to its individual members.

We should not underestimate the moral force of the sense of security that attachment to caste and community gives to the individual in a changing and uncertain world. It is to this that N. K. Bose drew attention in one of his later writings, a brilliant essay on the motley assortment of castes and communities that make up the city of Calcutta. He described the various castes among the Bengali Hindus—Kayasthas, Kansaris, Namshudras—living cheek-by-jowl with Oriyas, Sikhs, Urdu-speaking Muslims, Bengali-speaking Muslims, Gujarati Baniyas, and many others, all regarding themselves and regarded by others as so many different *jats*. He drew attention to the economic compulsions that kept them together, reinforcing in each a sense of its distinct identity:

Because there are not enough jobs to go around everyone clings as closely as possible to the occupation with which his ethnic group is identified and relies for economic support on those who speak his , language, his co-religionists, on members of his own caste and on fellow immigrants from the village or district from which he has come (1965: 102).

The continuing strength of these collective identities is a reflection of the failure of the institutions of civil society to take root and gather strength in independent India. Civil society requires a variety of open and secular institutions—schools, universities, hospitals, municipal corporations, professional bodies and voluntary associations of many different kinds—to mediate between the individual and the wider society of which he is a part. At the time of independence, it was hoped that these open and secular institutions would give shape and substance to democracy in India and at the same time drive back the consciousness of caste and community. They have failed to provide what was expected of them, and it is no surprise that the older forms of collective identities have not only held their ground but become increasingly assertive.

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