

What Is Caste?

(IV) Caste-Society and Vedantic Thought

Iravati Karve

This is the fourth and last in a series of articles, the first of which, "Caste as Extended Kin" appeared in the last Annual Number; the second, "Caste and Occupation", in the issue of March 22, 1958; and the third "Caste as a Status Group", in the Special Number of July 1958.

/// this article the author measures the social isolation of castes from one another against, their economic interdependence and discusses the relation between cultural differences and social isolation.

finally, the social hierarchy is analysed with reference to the religious and philosophical ideas of Hinduism, in particular to ideas which concern inequality.

CASTE-SOCIETY is made up in ^A such a way that a very large proportion of the activity of the individuals is confined to their own group. This is especially true of the social and cultural aspects of their lives.

In the economic sphere the individuals and the group as a whole come in contact with other groups. Buying and selling, serving in particular capacities and being paid or served in return, are the ways in which castes come in contact, with other groups. In cultural and social behaviour castes are never completely self-sufficient or isolated. Nor is economic dependence complete in all cases. The economic activities which involve interaction with other groups are of two types. One type involves rendering of certain traditional services at traditional and generally inadequate compensation and the other type can be described as economic interdependence where mutual services and compensations are more on terms of equality. Whether the economic activity is on equitable terms or whether it is a traditional form of exploitation, it brings individuals from one caste in contact with individuals from other castes. This quality of being comparatively self-contained in social and cultural activities and at the same time being linked with other groups in economic activities is a fundamental characteristic of groups called castes.

An Interaction Survey

A few examples will elucidate this. A survey was made two years ago to find out the nature and degree of intercommunal activity in rural areas*. For this work three villages were chosen and the head of each family was asked certain questions. The habi-

tation, area, and house sites were mapped. The questions asked were: Who had married whom? Who had given presents to whom? Whom did you invite for a meal? For a less informal party? For a cup of tea? Where were you invited for such hospitality? Whom did one visit for a few days? A day and night? Or for a few hours⁰ Who were own friends? Who were children's friends? If casual help was given what was its nature and to whom was it given? Who was tenant to whom? Who employed whom? Who borrowed money from whom? In addition there were questions about attitudes to intergroup intercourse.

The picture that emerged when all the data were tabulated was that the habitation area in each village was divided into areas containing houses of one caste. Within each such area contiguous houses belonging to one patri-lineage could be discovered as clusters. Besides the caste clusters the whole area was generally divided into two main habitation areas, one belonging to the higher castes, the touchables and the other belonging to the lowest castes, the untouchables. Different castes among touchables and untouchables within these larger areas lived a little separated from the others. The village habitation area was thus divided roughly into as many units as there were castes in the village. (A few exceptions were those who did not own a house but lived in rented quarters.)

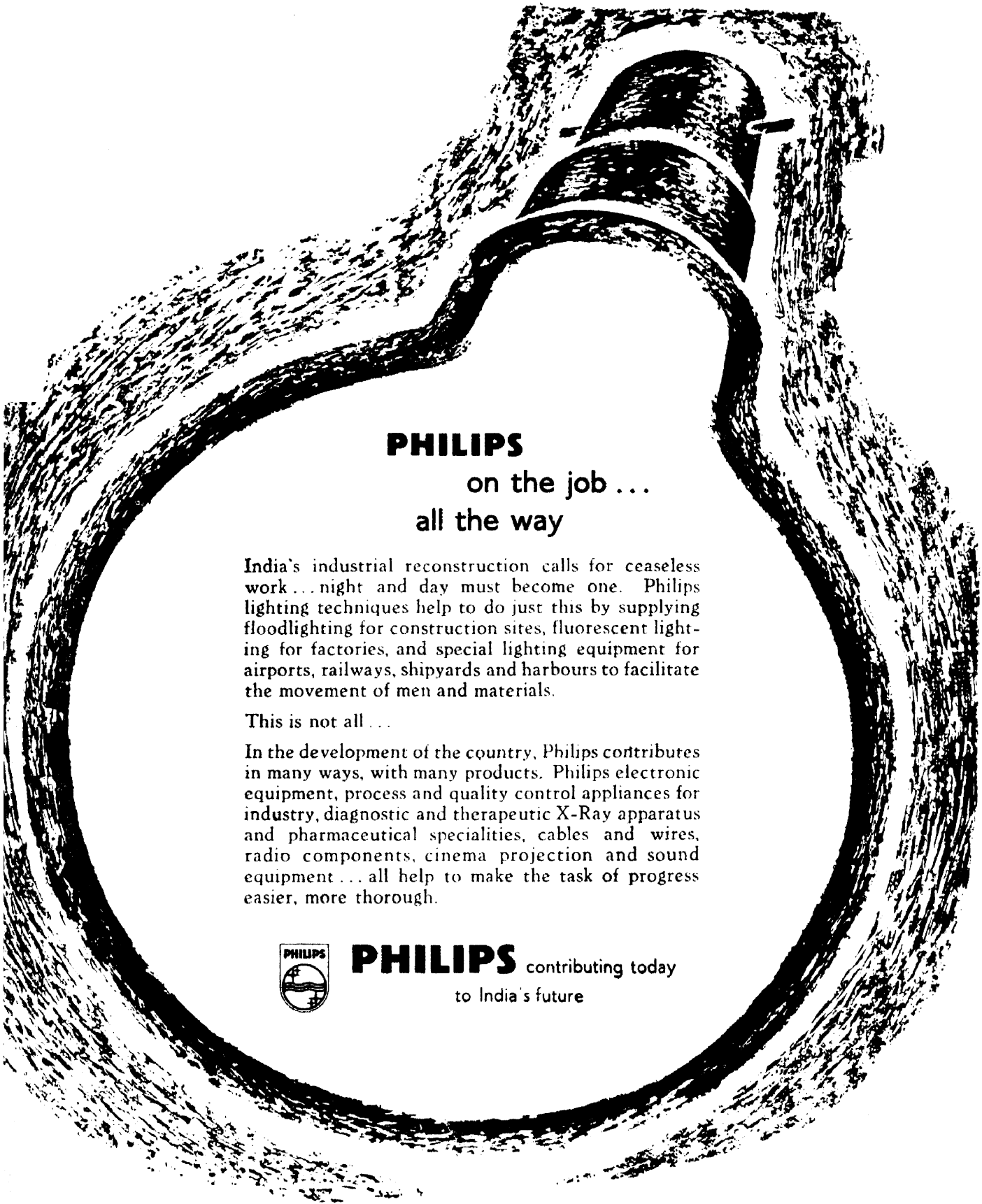
In the three villages surveyed not a single marriage had occurred

This survey was undertaken at the Deccan College, Poona on behalf of the Planning Commission. The report is not yet ready.

outside the caste. The attitudes showed that only one or two people among the higher castes expressed the opinion that they did not mind mixed marriages. As many as 25-50 per cent of the Mahars (one untouchable caste) expressed willingness to give their daughters to touchables or receive brides from touchables but were not willing to exchange brides with the Mangs. another untouchable caste. In my definition of caste as an extended kinship group this fact of endogamy has been brought out.

As regards inviting people to a meal, going to others for meals and visiting for a few days, the activities were confined in nearly 90 per cent of cases to the kinship group. The remaining 10 per cent was within the caste group. The same was the case with friendships. Dr McKim Marriott in a personal communication told the author that in his observation in north Indian villages also, friendships outside the caste-group were not only rare but were generally accompanied by much shame and feelings of guilt. Gift-giving, where the pattern is not disturbed by modern business relations, is confined almost purely to the kin-group.

Giving and receiving of help include activities ranging from giving food-grains to a man in need, to giving shelter in own house to somebody whose house had been burnt down, or nursing in illness. It was found that outright giving of foodgrains or clothing to people of a caste other than one's own was not uncommon but not a single case of sheltering in one's own house or nursing an ill person of a caste other than one's own was recorded. A few people who had occasion to receive such help



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always aid so from the kin or, on a few rare occasions, from people of their caste.

As regards the other activities people were tenants to people of other castes, they borrowed money from any caste, and accepted employment from anybody.

Links across Caste

Thus purely social activities were confined within the caste while economic activities cut across the caste-frontiers. On certain occasions in a village meals are served to people of all castes. This does not form an exception to the above rule because the meals are not given on terms of equality. Such meals are given only by the richer and more influential people of the 'higher' castes. The near kin, the important people from one's own caste and other people of higher castes sit for meals together. Such people as the barber, the carpenter, etc., may come into the house and may be served meals in an open shed which is part of the house, while people belonging to the untouchable castes may line the road outside and get their share of food after everybody else has eaten. In this context a meal does not entail social give and take on terms of equality.

The social self-containedness of the caste is broken on certain occasions when all castes in a village appear to combine for achieving certain common ends like celebrating certain festivals, sometimes for common defence against dacoits, and sometimes to make common representation to the Government. I have used the word 'sometimes' deliberately, because the usual picture even of a dacoity is that the poorer people either shut themselves up in their houses or run away from the village and leave the richer people to face the robbers. The poor and the rich are not only economic classes but often caste groups too. Among Maratha and Brahmin there may be richer and poorer people, but all of them are better off than the Mahar, the Mang and the Ramoshi. In the same way the few families belonging to the Van! caste are in possession of more cash and ornaments than other castes.

The social isolation is broken more often in the modern urban setting. Boys of different castes study in the same class and friend-

ships are formed. These friendships may remain outside of the family circle and may lead to tensions and frustrations. Among people working in the same place similar situations arise. As long as these friendships are kept away from the family and the home there is no open conflict but the minute they impinge on that sphere tensions arise. This is especially the case among people belonging to castes which are educationally and economically backward. If a man of such a caste tries to have friendship with men of higher castes he is looked down upon as a climber by the advanced set, and earns hatred and jealousy from his own caste, who dub him a deserter.

Cultural Traits

The characteristic of being socially self-contained and its consequences are easy to demonstrate. It is not however so obvious that cultural differences occur among groups who hold themselves socially apart because certain important cultural traits are shared by people of different castes living over a very wide area.

One caste differentiates itself from the other sharply in respect of the circle of social intercourse especially as it is endogamous, but each caste does not differ from another culturally as sharply or as definitely. Cultural similarities range over a very wide area and include a large number of castes in more than one linguistic region. In this respect the relation of culture and caste is similar to that between race and caste. As an endogamous group a caste may have certain physical traits which, taken together, are peculiar to it but the physical traits taken individually or even group-wise are shared with other castes over a very wide area. Some traits like Rh blood factors, MN factors or AB factors may be shared by a particular caste not only with other castes in India but with people belonging to a very wide area of the earth.

As regards family structure, patrilineity and patrilocality are features common not only to the whole of the northern Indian plains but are shared by these people with a majority of people in central Asia and eastern Europe. In the same way cross-cousin marriage is

practised not only in central and south India but also by many communities in the whole of the south-east Asia with its continental and island world.

There are other cultural peculiarities which are shared by castes over one or more linguistic regions. In parts of the Punjab and U P there is a taboo against marriage within a village. In the south people prefer such marriages. In the whole of the north when people cut vegetables and other things in a kitchen with a knife, the thing to be cut remains on a board while the hand with the cutting implement moves up and down. In the south the cutting implement is a blade (curved or straight) which is fixed in a wooden board on which the cutter sits. The thing to be cut is held in the hand and moved up and down while the implement remains stationary.

As regards use of different types of utensils it was found in one part of Maharashtra* that Brahmins do not use earthen ware for cooking while other castes did. Here we have a cultural trait which distinguishes one caste from another in a small area.

Social Isolation and Cultural Traits

Social isolation need not necessarily accompany cultural differences. Among many primitive societies, tribes are socially as separate as castes- and still share common culture. But caste makes two things possible: (1) If two castes have separate cultures they can retain them indefinitely and (2) starting from the same cultural roots if differentiations occur through innovations or new acquisitions they are allowed to remain and flourish. There were however limitations to innovations and new acquisitions laid down by caste hierarchy. In pre-British days, for example, people of some castes were not allowed to wear gold-ornaments. At present a Mahar will not be allowed to build a house within the area of the

* A report was prepared in course of an evaluation of a community project after investigating 25 villages near Kolhapur. The report is not yet published. It was prepared by a committee of investigation appointed by the Poona University.



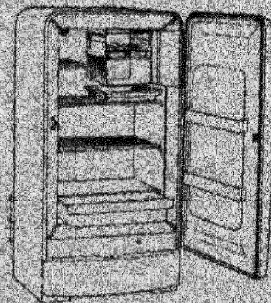
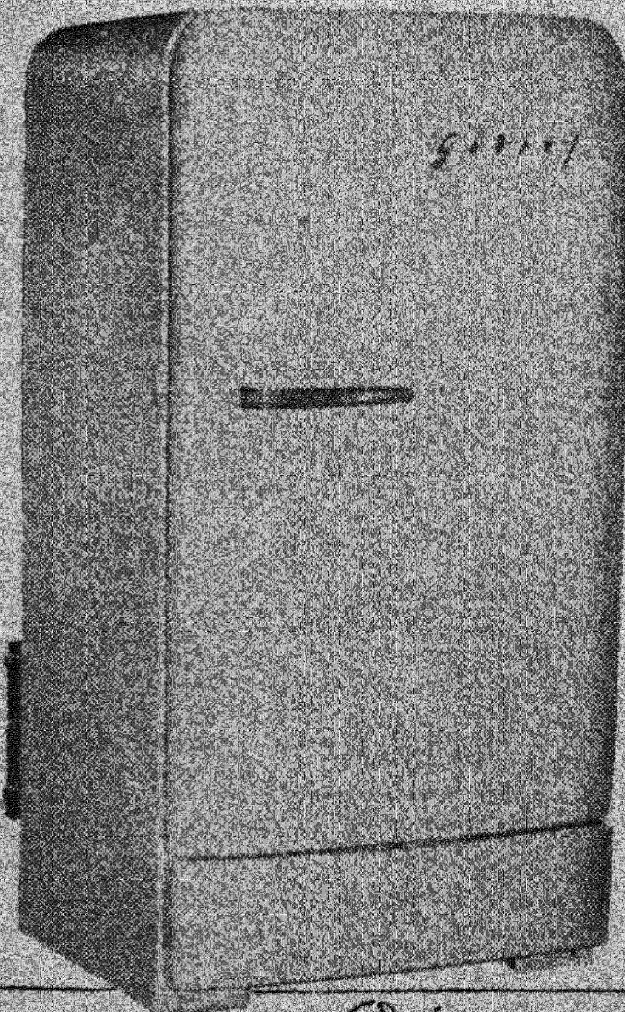
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village where the higher castes have their houses.

A few examples of cultural differences between castes living within a region are as follows. Within the Brahmin caste-cluster there are a number of endogamous castes. Among these the Madhyandin Brahmins do not allow cross-cousin marriage, neither do they allow the marriage of a man to a bride having the same gotra as his mother. Both these marriage regulations are found in the northern plains of India. The Chitpavan Brahmins do not as a rule allow cross-cousin marriage or the marriage of a man to his sister's daughter. The Karhada Brahmins (who live in the same area as the Chitpavans) and the Deshastha Rigvedi Brahmins allow cross-cousin marriage and also the marriage of a man to his sister's daughter. Throughout western Maharashtra there is no taboo against marriage of people living in the same village. There is however one Kumbhar caste which allows cross-cousin marriage but does not permit marriage between people living in the same village. Among some Brahmins and Marathas the general mode of cross-cousin marriage is that a man marries his mother's brother's daughter but not his father's sister's daughter. The author found that among Mahars both kinds of cross-cousin marriage is allowed. In western Maharashtra no caste allows a widow to marry her husband's younger brother; this custom is found among many castes in eastern Maharashtra.

Food and Dress

Differences also exist in other matters like food, dress and worship.

In Maharashtra among most Brahmin castes non-vegetarian food is taboo but the Saraswat Brahmins eat fish. Among Vanis non-vegetarian food is also taboo. Most other castes eat such food but cow's meat is forbidden. Cow's meat was universally eaten by Mahars not so long ago but now many of them have given it up. The variety in dress is best seen in culture-contact regions like the districts of Khandesh, Bhandara and Chanda. There are castes which settled in Maharashtra in recent historical times. The differences in the dress of these castes

and the surrounding Maharashtra castes show various degrees of acculturation. Even within the region there are certain traditional differences. The head-gear of the Marathas was different from that of the Brahmins. The women of the Mali caste wear a choli, the sleeves of which cover the elbows and come down an inch; the women of the Maratha caste wear a choli which stops short of the elbow; while to the women of the Vaddar caste a choli or any sewn garment to cover the upper part of the body is altogether taboo.

Religious Practice

The same phenomenon occurs also as regards religious practices though the lines of demarcation are not as definite as in the case of the cultural items described upto now.

Some castes have gods of their own and if they can afford it, members of a caste may build a temple to their gods or goddesses. Such a temple is owned by the caste. In Poona, one such temple is that of Kasardevi. As the name makes it clear, the goddess is a patron of the makers of copper and brass pots. The temple is situated near Kasarali (the street of the Kasars). Banashankari is the goddess of certain weaver castes, but she is also worshipped by others. Mari-ai is a goddess of the Mahars and her temple is found in most villages in Maharashtra in the habitation area of the Mahars. The worshipping priests always belong to the Mahar caste. Some shepherd castes on the border of Karnatak and Maharashtra have a god called Bharamappa. The Marathi god Khandoba has two wives. One of them is the special goddess of the Marathi Dhangars (shepherds). Among Brahmins also, different castes have preference for different gods. Khandoba is worshipped by Deshastha Rigvedi Brahmins (Marathas and some other castes also worship him). Chitpavans worship mostly god Shiva belonging to one of the coastal shrines in the Ratnagiri district. Many Madhyandin Brahmins are worshippers of Renuka of Mahurgad.

More than gods, the modes of worship are sometimes exclusive to a caste. One such example is a peculiar custom called Bodan which is performed in honour of a mother-goddess by the Chitpavan Brahmins only. As already said

worship of a god is not exclusive to a caste. It is more regional and familial, it also depends on the spiritual experience of an individual. Anybody, irrespective of caste, may pay homage to any god provided in so doing he does not transgress the taboos set on his caste. Chokha Mela a saint of Maharashtra was a Mahar and a great devotee of the god Vithoba of Pandharpur. He worshipped the god standing outside the temple because as an untouchable he was not allowed to 'go into the temple.

Whatever the family or caste god, all people in a village must support the chief god of the village besides many minor ones. Besides gods, everyone pays respect to all kinds of goblins and spirits whose little shrines are spread all over the country by the road-side or under a tree or besides running water. Though gods may not be exclusive possessions of a caste still a certain preference for certain gods and shrines is seen among castes. This, combined with certain performances and modes and duration of observing pollution at birth and death, modes of worship, fast days and feast days together, allows one caste to be distinguished from another as regards religious and magical practices.

These examples should suffice to show that in a caste-society groups live side by side which differ culturally from one another in smaller or greater degrees.

Meaning of Separateness

This peculiarity of the caste-society raises certain interesting questions which must be briefly indicated to give a proper idea of what is meant by social separateness of caste-groups.

What exactly is the degree of separateness? What are the cultural similarities and diversities of castes? There are certain cultural items which are shared by castes over a very wide area. One such item is language. Hundreds of endogamous castes together numbering from ten million to over forty million and living in a contiguous area speak a mutually understandable language. In the Tanjore district of Madras there are castes from Maharashtra which emigrated in the 18th century and which still speak a kind of Marathi

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in their family circle. The same is the case in Central India and Gujarat in the states of Gwalior, Dhar, Indore, Devas and Baroda. At all these places the raja was a Maratha and the Marathi language was the spoken language of the rulers. It should be noted however that all the speakers of Marathi in these states also knew and spoke the language of the region in which they were placed. There are however certain castes whose retention of their language is due to other causes which are directly related to the nature of the caste society. The trading groups like Marwaris retain their language. They are numerically small groups and have to go to Marwar to bring brides and give their daughters. The caste endogamy is a factor which makes a group retain its language. The Ramoshi in Satara and Poona districts have all their marriages within these districts and yet within the family they talk a language which retains a very large proportion of Kannada words. This is understandable when one reflects that they were listed as criminal tribes and lived a life in many ways apart from other castes. This language was described as a 'secret' language and they kept it as it was very necessary for their profession. A common language is a cultural item shared by all castes in a region.

As regards other items the proportion of castes sharing in them gradually diminishes until we come to certain traits which are found exclusively in one caste only. There are certain cultural items which are spread among almost all castes over many linguistic regions. In the north from Punjab to Assam and from the foothills of the Himalayas almost upon the river Narmada (barring some of the primitive tribes) there is a taboo on cross-cousin marriage, while in the region south of the above, cross-cousin marriages are allowed.

Conformity and Non-conformity: Regional Pattern

How did cultural traits spread over such large areas or were they always there even before groups called castes emerged? What are the mechanisms by which an immigrant group adopts a cultural trait found in the region of its settlement? Certain castes take up certain traits, others do others.

What is it that determines this choice? In the absence of a political or religious agency to impose certain norms, what are the agencies leading to gradual conformity to a regional pattern or to persistence in certain traits and non-conformity? The words conformity or non-conformity cannot really be used in the context of the larger caste-society because conformity or non-conformity are of prime importance as regards behaviour within caste rather than as regards behaviour outside caste.

The very structure of the caste society supplies clues for finding out answers to some of these questions. The fact of being socially self-contained may retard imitation and conformity, but caste hierarchy (of which more presently) may lead to imitation which again may be forbidden because of the very hierarchy which brings it about. Then again the regional position which a caste occupies (e.g., border area), its profession (e.g., refer to the Ramoshi caste mentioned above), the duration of its habitation in an area and the fact of its continued intercourse outside the region (the Marwaris mentioned above) are factors which must be considered while studying the mechanism of change. Whatever the agencies of change, the urge to conformity is never so great that one can find large tracts of land, containing many castes following the same pattern as regards dress, food, kinship organisation and worship.

A caste society allows groups to live side by side living their lives separately and coming together in certain economic relations and certain formal social relations. We have seen that there is exchange of goods and ideas among these groups. Some castes may give up some practice to take up another but the most important process is not of elimination and choice but of amalgamation and accretion. Different practices are not felt as cultural alternatives of which one can remain and the other must be given up, but they are allowed to remain side by side. That is what has happened especially as regards gods and modes of worship. Ever new gods are added and ever new methods of worship are acquired without giving up the old ones. A vegetarian Brahmin, who worships

his own household gods with sandalwood paste and flowers, does not feel it contradictory to pay his share of the contribution to buy a goat or chicken to be killed as sacrifice before the village god and or Mari-ai,

Caste Hierarchy

Mention has been made of the caste-hierarchy as impelling and at the same time preventing imitation. This brings us to the second important aspect of caste-society. The caste society has not only made it possible for a great variety of cultural patterns to live side by side but has divided this whole society into almost as many ranks as there are castes in each region.

We have dealt with one part of this ranking which theoretically divides the whole caste-society into four major varnas and saw how the castes from the fourth varna try to rise to the status of one of the higher three varnas. (Special Number, July 1958.) Within each varna there are differences in ranking leading to hypergamous marriages and these were also indicated in that article.

There it was indicated that ranking is vitally important for castes in the fourth group, the Shudra'. We have seen how the castes within the three varnas rank, the rivalries of the three varnas and how their position differs from region to region depending on which the dominant caste is. The position of the Brahmins was always disputed by the Kshatriyas and in the regions where Jainism and Lingayatism are powerful, Brahmins have taken a lower position. But whatever the position and rivalries of the castes of the varnas, the position of all the castes of the fourth varna has been held to be lower than the position of all the castes of the first three varnas.

With the fourth varna are found castes of petty agriculturists, or agricultural labourers, artisans, herders of cattle, sheep, goats and camels, fishermen and boatmen, barbers and washermen, shoe-makers, tanners, removers of dead cattle from the farmers' cow-sheds, musicians, mendicants, and robbers. From among many of these groups there are certain castes which have claimed to be Brahmins (e.g., some



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carpenter castes call themselves Vishva-Brahmins) and others have called themselves Kshatriyas (e.g. some cowherds call themselves Yadava Kshatriyas). But for the purpose of the present article we need not consider these groups.

The artisans like carpenters and weavers have in Maharashtra higher status than Kumbhar who make earthen pots. Some castes of iron-smiths have a high status, others have a very low status. Herders of cattle who are also milkmen are higher than shepherds and goatherds. Boatmen have a higher status than fishermen; barbers are quite high in some regions and extremely low in others. The washerman has generally a low status. The shoe-makers, tanners etc. have the lowest status and are held to be untouchable. There are some castes which are untouchable in one region and touchable in another. In the above description of status, English words are used to indicate the usual occupation of castes but that may lead to misunderstanding. It would be better to use the caste-name because that would show clearly that whatever the origin of status, at the present time it depends on the caste rather than on occupation.

For example, a Brahmin who has started the business of skinning (with his own hands) the dead animal and tanning the hide may for a time lose status on his own caste but does not become an untouchable like the hereditary tanners, the Chambhars and Dhors. A Maratha claiming to be highborn Kshatriya remains a Maratha even when he sells vegetables or opens a grocery shop or runs a boarding house. That this was the case in olden days is shown by hundreds of stories.

Criteria of Ranking

Dr McKim Harriot, in a paper on rank among castes (to be published by the Deccan College), has tried to give a scheme of ranking by asking people which castes they held to be higher and lower. It would be worth while to get an idea of ranking by asking who dined with whom and who sat with whom. In the village when the whole village is to be fed by the rich man the place where a guest is fed gives an idea of ranking.

Ranking is connected with ideas of distance and pollution. The

caste most obsessed by ideas of pollution was Brahmin. The author, a Brahmin, remembers that as a school girl she had to change all her school-clothes which were polluted through coming in contact with "God knows what castes", before being allowed to eat or move freely in the house. The other castes share these ideas as regards untouchables. The habitation area of the untouchables is always separate. If a village is situated on the bank of a river or stream, the untouchables must use the water only from the lower reaches while the place for bathing, fetching water etc. (called Panotha) of the touchables was always on the upper reaches. In some villages the village street is divided into two parts, one higher and the other lower and only the latter can be used by the untouchables. Men of higher castes sat on horseback while those of the lower castes could and did use the donkey occasionally. The distinctions of rank and the disabilities of the lower castes increased as one went from north to south in India. The principle of rank does not distinguish merely the touchable from the untouchable but makes distinctions between each group. The Chambhar (shoe-maker) ranks highest among the untouchable castes. Mahar comes next and the lowest are Mangs who are not allowed by Mahars to use their well for drawing drinking water. For certain purposes women (of even higher castes) were held as equivalent to Shudras and certain things (reading or reciting the Vedic Mantras) were taboo to both.

The hierarchy is such that almost all castes have some castes lower than them. The situation is well described by a Marathi poet (Covindaraj - died in 1919) who describes the Hindu society as made up of men "who bow their heads to the kicks from above, who simultaneously give a kick below, never thinking to resist the one, or to refrain from the other." Rank or hierarchy perpetuates privileges and injustices. It increases isolation, at the same time creating conflicts and an intense desire to rise in the social scale.

Caste Ideas In Antiquity

We need not go into the question as to how long this social structure with all its ramifications has been in existence in India. I think that anthropologists and Indologists will agree with me when I state that by

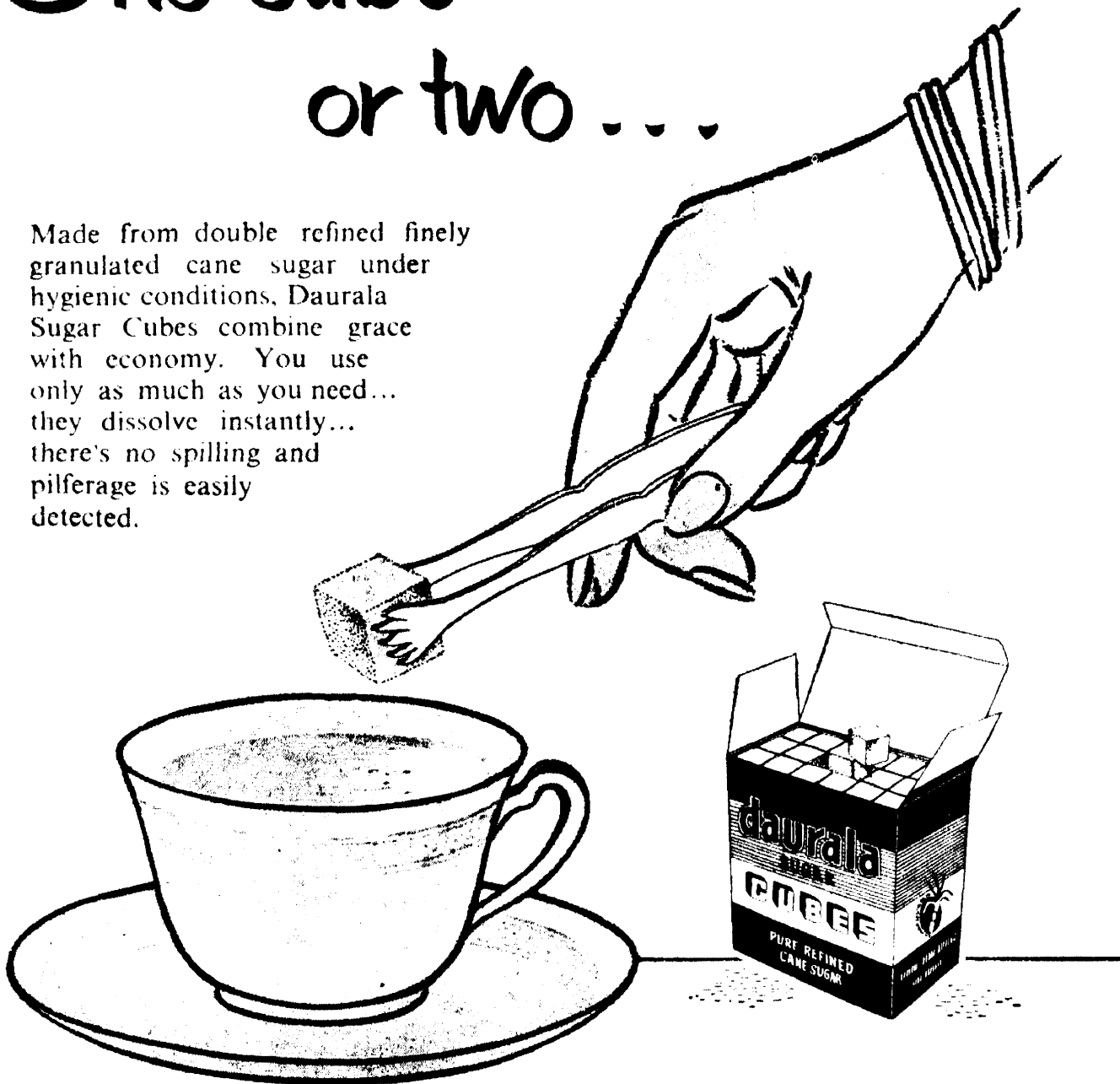
about 500 A D, if not earlier, the structure existed almost as we know it today. Sanskrit and Prakrit literature - story, aphorism and drama - bear ample evidence of the existence of such a society; It also gives revealing glimpses of sentiments and values, privileges and discriminations which arose in this society. The most revealing are expressions of intercaste prejudice and distrust giving rise to certain stereotypes.

But apart from all this light literature, there exists a body of philosophical doctrines worked into a system which fits the caste society as described above. The various doctrines which make up this system were in existence for a very long time (about a thousand years) before the eighth century A D, but at this time they were worked into a single philosophical system about the nature of reality, validity of knowledge, the existence of the world and the beings in it and about the ideal of human endeavour. This philosophy is called Advaita-vedanta of Shankara, Shankara, a Nambudri Brahmin born in Kerala in the 8th century reviewed and criticised different philosophical theories, which were in existence then, *refuted* some and brought the others together into a well-knit whole. When one analyses some of the features of this system one sees its intimate connection with the caste-society. This fact need not affect the validity of the speculation about Ultimate Reality contained in the system. This type of interdependence of a social system and intellectual speculation can be demonstrated for other countries and other systems also.

As already noted the doctrines expounded by Shankara were known for a thousand years before him but unlike his predecessors, Shankara wrote commentaries on almost all the important philosophical texts extant at his time. He wrote on the most important Upanishads, the Brahma Sutra and the Bhagvat-geeta and also commented on the Buddhist and Jain systems of thought. Thus he gave for the first time in lucid forceful prose a well organised system of thought, about the Ultimate Reality and its relationship to the world in which we live and act. The doctrine of Reality is connected with two other doctrines which are not logically bound with it but which formed part of

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the philosophical thought of the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists from very ancient times. These were also taken up by Shankara in his system, viz, the doctrines of (a) Karma and (b) Re-birth. When all these are taken together they form a system of thought which is astonishingly pertinent to the Hindu caste-society. This body of doctrines with its social implications is given below.

The Ultimate Reality

About the Ultimate Reality which is called Brahma, (The word is usually written as Brahman. I have written it in its nominative singular form so as to avoid confusion with the word Brahman used for a caste) there are four propositions. The first proposition says, 'Brahma is one, without a second' (Ekam eva advitiam Brahma); the second proposition says, 'All this is Brahma' (Sarvam khalu idam Brahma); the third proposition says, "You are 'If.'" (Tat twain asi); the fourth says, "I am Brahma" (Aham Brahma asmi). The first proposition says that Reality is one, the second says that whatever one sees round is that Reality, and the third and fourth that a human being is that Reality.

These statements sound contradictory inasmuch as what is asserted as one is said to be many and that again is said to be an individual. This is explained by commentaries in such a way that the Absolutely Real, the one Brahma in its entirety can be neither seen, nor heard, nor imagined. It is beyond all predication, it is neither good nor bad, neither bright nor dark. It is beyond time and space, or in other words the only categories of space and time which can be applied to it are here and now. This reality is spoken of always as 'it'. The second proposition tells that 'all this', the world of sense and experience spread before us. is also 'it' or Brahma. The reconciliation of these two propositions and the explanation of the inter-relation between the Ultimate Reality and this world of experience form the core of the philosophical thought. It is in this context that Shankara uses two concepts. As against the reality of Brahma he calls the world of sense merely an appearance, an unreality, which has a dreamlike quality. This dream would vanish the minute the Ultimate Reality is

realised- this is called his doctrine of Maya. Shankara uses another expression also when describing the inter-relation of the Absolute and the world of sense. The first he calls "the absolute truth", (I'aramarthika Satya). The second he calls "the behavioural truth" (Vyavaharika Satya). The second alone is capable of value judgments, which cannot be applied at all to Brahma.

The World of Appearances

It is this doctrine which is important from a sociological point of view. The world of appearance comprises heavens, earths, hells, gods, men and demons and all the other things in it. All this is 'appearance'; one of its qualities is that it is bounded by time and space. On the one hand it has a right to be recognised, as "it is Brahma", on the other hand it has no absolute Reality inasmuch as it is not the whole of it. The moral order belongs to this world of appearances. That moral precepts change according to time and space was realised by all Indian writers. The only way to reduce the relativity of moral truth was to imagine the whole world to be a family (Vasudhau eva Kutumbakam), the one social group which gave some kind of justice to everybody in it. This doctrine of the Absolute Truth somehow containing behavioural truths gave justification for the existence side by side of many gods, many forms of worship and many patterns of behaviour. The absolute, though infinite and indescribable, still gave certain rules of behaviour.

Moral Neutrality

One such rule is 'samata' or 'samadarshitva'. The former word is currently used as the equivalent to the English word 'equality' but in Sanskrit philosophical literature, as also in old Marathi literature, the word samata' has quite another meaning. It expresses an attitude of complete neutrality. The examples given by Dnaneshwar (13th century), which are taken directly from older Sanskrit philosophical literature are as follows 'Water in a stream) does not say that "I will quench the thirst of the cow but become poisonous and kill the tiger"; the earth does not say, "I shall give support to the good and deny it to the bad". In the same way must a man behave. More

than for ordinary beings was this the norm for the behaviour of the king, viz, impartiality to all groups in his kingdom. In order to make common intercourse (vyavahara) possible, certain rules of behaviour, especially those embodied in criminal law, were devised, but a common civil law even in one kingdom was never in existence. Each case of dispute was solved according to the established traditions of a group, in this instance the caste.

In Europe the church and the king were the two agencies which laid down norms of social behaviour and made people follow them by a constant supervision and ruthless punishment. The very doctrine of Brahma and its many manifestations made it impossible for any priesthood or any king to claim divine sanction for one set of rules and call all others the creation of Satan. 'Samata' was the virtue prescribed for the king, the head of a household, the husband of many wives. The only well developed law was criminal law and the law for individual behaviour was tradition. It was said that even when one realised fully that all that one experiences is an appearance, one must go on doing all the things one did. The only difference between the behaviour before such a realisation and the behaviour after such realisation was that in the latter stage, behaviour had no goal to reach, no desires to fulfil. In this stage when one reaches the state described in the fourth proposition "I am Brahma" one is above all gods, all religion, all morality.

This proposition had a consequence which was drawn and uttered by both philosophers and sages: when it was stated: "God is a creation of our belief". Man is the maker of gods and gods necessarily are many because men's desires and beliefs are many. This justified the existence side by side of different gods and different customs. Buddhism and Jainism, though opposed to orthodox Hinduism, never denied that the gods of the Hindus were not gods. They were merely given a subordinate position with limited powers.

Diversity and Unity

The ultimate unity of Hindu culture including such dissident doctrines as Buddhism and Jainism was as difficult to realise, as the 'one Brahma', while the diversity of

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cultural practices was as obvious as the world of appearances. This doctrine, while explaining the variety, also taught that there was nothing wrong in this variety and each pattern had a right to exist.

Ever new patterns may arise because the manifestations of Brahma are infinite but this change is not necessarily at the expense of something already existing. "The old order changeth yielding place to new" was not the key to change. Change occurred gradually and in part only and the new and the newer existed side by side with the old and the older. If evolution was an interpretation of history from the point of view of the latest and the newest, the Indian point of view of history has been one in which all the past and all the present is spread out in a seemingly static existence. In Europe Christianity struggled to suppress the older faiths and establish the one God and the one true religion. The social process as one of selection and choice by a few and then, forceful suppression in order to universalise whatever was chosen. In India on the other hand simultaneous and peaceful co-existence of many religions and many gods became the norm of social existence.

Karma

It was stated above that side by side with the doctrine of Brahma were two other ideas woven into the philosophical system which were of great social consequence. These were (1) the law of Karma and (2) the doctrine of re-birth. As against the Brahma-Doctrine, these two concern the world of appearances and have no place in the 'Ultimate Reality'. The connection of these two with Brahma will become clear later.

The law of Karma takes for granted that all existence, especially of living beings, including that of those who live in heaven and those who live in hell, is bound up together in a chain of existence which normally has no end. Almost every act of a human being has a minus or a plus value. At death if the plus value is greater than the minus, that individual is born either in heaven or on earth in a status better than the one enjoyed by him. If the balance is on the minus side, then one goes to hell or is born on earth in a lower status, or as a beast or a plant un-

til the minus balance is exhausted, when one is born again as a human being. Karma is good or bad action. "Sanchita karma" is the capital with which one is born. "Prarabdha karma" is the capital one is accumulating at a given time. The very fact that one is born means that one is re-born, until one is able to attain liberation.

This is the doctrine of rebirth. A birth and all that follows is the result of Sanchita karma or accumulated actions of a past birth. Human birth is the only birth in which one can refuse to accumulate a capital of good and evil. This can be done only by realising the Reality of Brahma, reaching the state of mind called "samata" and living through life without any desires. Then there is no accumulation of capital and then there is final release from the chain of births and deaths.

Social Inequality

That part of the doctrine which states that being born as particular being or in a particular status is due to accumulated merit or demerit is socially important. It justifies the social inequalities of the caste system and at the same time gives hope of betterment to all. It also gives a definition of meritorious conduct which makes it possible for all the castes to achieve a plus balance of some sort and thereby raises traditionalism to be the highest moral conduct.

Let us consider these points one by one. In Bhagvatgeeta when Shri Krishna was explaining the way for reaching the highest Brahma, Arjuna was disturbed by a doubt. Suppose one were to die while yet endeavouring to reach the goal, what would happen? Will one have to begin the task all over again in another birth? Shri Krishna calms the fears by stating that the endeavours of one birth are never wasted. One is born in a noble family, where people do good and avoid evil, where the whole atmosphere lends itself to do meritorious deeds and one is endowed with qualities of head and heart and character in such a way that little effort is needed to achieve what was left undone in the previous birth.

This suggests that a certain status in life is more conducive to accumulation of good than certain others. For example, being born of well-to-do people, who are gene-

rous, who care for physical purity, who give to the priests, the gods, and the poor their due is the result of the accumulated capital of former births and in its turn leads to further accumulation of merit. Obviously then, for an untouchable living in filthy surroundings and doing filthy work, the realisation of Brahma was a far cry. His very lowly position was the stamp of the accumulation of evil in a previous birth. This doctrine went far beyond the justification of the existence of diversity. It justified social inequality.

Being born in favourable circumstances was one thing and making use of them was quite another. In fact, the very easiness of circumstances might lead to temptations which would slacken the efforts or even make one forget the goal of Brahma-realisation. The birth gave one an advantage, one may be born as god, or a Brahmin or a great warrior, but power is prone to lead one to destruction; the very recognition of one's saintliness may lead to pride and downfall and to being born in a humble state. Recognising this fact as a consequence of one's own action in a previous birth may be conducive to Brahma-realisation. One is humble, one's earthly circumstances are bad enough so as not to be attractive and one may turn to god with greater fervour. (It may be noted that devotion to a god without any ulterior motives was one of the easier paths for Brahma-realisation.) In this way, the theory of Karma and Rebirth while justifying social inequality, held out a future hope for betterment and promised ultimate equality in the goal of Brahma-realisation.

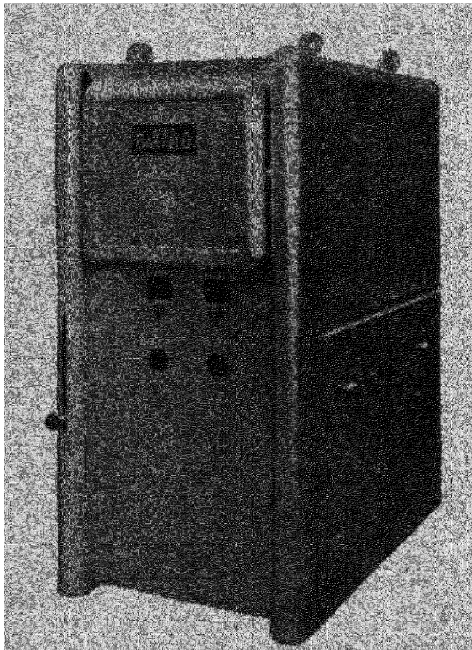
The Social Reality of Karma

We come now to the third part of the Karma theory. Most Karma has a positive or a negative value but certain Karma like breathing, opening and shutting of eyelids has no value. Karma like urinating or defecating, though necessary bodily action, might have positive or negative value depending on the time and place where such actions are performed. A large number of Karma have a different value for people of different status. If a Brahmin starts a butcher's shop or a liquor-shop he is sure to go to hell. There are other ways of getting his livelihood. But if a man

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belonging to the caste of hunters and butchers or liquor-sellers does it, it is not a sin, it has no negative value and it does not hinder these people from accumulating the positive capital of merit or even from Brahma-realisation.

It is said that all Karma done from a mere sense of duty and not from motives of gain or aggrandisement were without either a positive or negative value, and provided that one realised the unity of self with all at the same time, one could reach Brahma. There would be no accumulated capital necessitating a rebirth. This doctrine taught that one had to bear one's earthly lot, if sad, without rancour, if good, without pride and so would the gates of release be opened.

Traditional Behaviour Raised To Highest Moral Principle

In this context the following story from Mahabharata is revealing (A ran yak Par van Adhyaya 197-206.) A holy Brahmin sitting in contemplation under a tree was spattered with excreta. He looked up in great anger and saw a pair of birds which at his look died instantaneously. He then started on his daily round to beg food in the city. He came to a house and called loudly that he had arrived. The housewife who was cleaning the pots asked him to wait. In the meanwhile the husband of the woman came home. As soon as she saw him, she left, her work, washed her hands, brought food for the husband and while he ate stood by him talking sweetly and serving him. After the husband had eaten she remembered the Brahmin standing outside and came out hastily with food, begged the mendicant's pardon and asked him to accept food. The Brahmin in a rage abused her and enquired if she thought it proper behaviour to keep a Brahmin waiting. She replied calmly that as a married woman her first duty was to her husband and a Brahmin should not get angry and go on killing birds. The Brahmin was surprised at her answer and begged to know further about duty and meritorious life. She had no time but directed him to a butcher living in the kingdom of King Janaka in the city of Mithila.

The Brahmin walked for days and on reaching Mithila was directed to the butcher's shop. He stood

apart but the butcher saw him, hurriedly stepped down, bowed at the feet of the Brahmin and took him home. After worshipping him the butcher told him about his killing the birds and his conversation with the dutiful housewife. The Brahmin was astonished and asked how a man doing such work could have such spiritual achievements. The butcher replied, "What I do is because of the deeds of my past birth. I can't help it. But I do it from a sense of duty only, I serve my parents and gods, give to Brahmins and live without untruth and cruelty". Then follows a long discourse on how everybody must do what has been apportioned through deeds of the last birth and how one could still be released.

The moral is obvious. Despised beings like women and Shudras (the two are always bracketed together)

can get extraordinary powers and attain Brahma-realisation provided they do their traditional work in a humble spirit with a sense of duty rather than for self aggrandisement. Arjuna's business as a Kshatriya was to fight and provided he did it purely from a sense of duty and not to enjoy the status of a king, no blame attached to him. Traditional behaviour was thus raised to the highest moral principle. A person was born in a particular status because of his own deeds and the best could be achieved by him by doing things which were done traditionally by people in that rank.

The Brahma doctrine together with the doctrines of Karma and rebirth were thus a complete justification for variety, inequality and traditionalism of the Indian caste-society.

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The first of the two articles, on Chinese agriculture, is by Rene Dumont, Professor of Comparative Agriculture at the Agronomic Institute in Paris. It is translated from 'Le Monde' of October 12th. Professor Dumont is the author of 'Revolution dans les Campagnes Chinoises' (1957) and is one of the leading Western authorities on Asian agriculture.

The second of the two articles is by the Indian economist K S Gill and is reprinted in somewhat abridged form from the special July 1958 number of the Bombay periodical 'The Economic Weekly'. Starting on a shoe-string, Sachin Chaudhuri, the editor, and a small group of devoted collaborators have built 'The Economic Weekly' up into one of the most lively and indispensable economic journals being published anywhere in the world to-day.

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