

INTRODUCTION: WHAT SHOULD WE MEAN BY CASTE?

By E. R. LEACH

The contributors to this symposium have in common that each has at one time or another worked in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University. They share a common viewpoint about the nature of social anthropology as an academic discipline and they share too a common interest in the cultures of the Indian sub-continent. But the essays which make up this volume, while they centre round the common theme of 'caste', have not been written from any common theoretical standpoint. Each essay stands by itself as an individual contribution to ethnographic knowledge.

Even so, taken as a collection, the essays are something rather more than a sum of individual statements on a common topic. Although each author writes of caste from a personal, individual point of view, certain interesting generalizations emerge from their joint discussions, and in this Introduction I shall try to set them out. I should stress perhaps that I am expressing a personal opinion which is not necessarily shared by any of my fellow contributors.

In the writings of anthropologists and sociologists the word 'caste' is used in two different senses. As an ethnographic category it refers exclusively to a system of social organization peculiar to Hindu India, but as a sociological category it may denote almost any kind of class structure of exceptional rigidity. Such double usage is unfortunate; the tendency to stress the 'status-group' component of caste prejudices the whole question as to what is the essential sociological nature of the Indian phenomenon. Conversely the merging of class and caste concepts is liable to lead to a highly distorted image of the nature of 'colour-bar' and other manifestations of rigid social differentiation (Cox 1948). Although the issue is approached indirectly, this ambiguity in the meaning of the word 'caste' is the central problem with which all the essays in this symposium are concerned.

In a formal sense, the word 'caste' as it occurs in this volume should always be taken to have its ethnographic Hindu meaning. The arrangement of the book is that the first, and longest, essay describes a *typical* example of caste organization in Southern India. The succeeding essays then describe variants of this pattern as they occur in Ceylon and North-west Pakistan. These variants diverge further and further from the ideal type, though each of them has been derived historically from a Hindu model. In effect the reader is

INTRODUCTION

invited to consider for himself just how far a social system can differ from the orthodox Hindu prototype yet still deserve the cultural label 'caste'.

Such a presentation raises directly the question as to whether caste is best considered as a cultural or as a structural phenomenon. This is an issue on which the authorities seem notably confused. Weber, for example, states categorically that 'Caste... is the fundamental institution of Hinduism' (Gerth and Mills 1947: 396). He implies thereby that caste is a specifically *cultural* concept, but then he proceeds at once to the remark that 'there are also castes among the Mohammedans of India... castes are also found among the Buddhists' (Gerth and Mills 1947: 396). This contradiction leads logically enough to an inquiry into the nature of caste, but here Weber's standpoint keeps shifting. On the one hand we are given various illustrative details of typical Hindu caste behaviour (i.e. cultural evidence) but this is backed up with a highly generalized discussion of the nature of 'closed status groups', race relations in the United States, and the behaviour of the European nobility (i.e. structural evidence). Weber thus evades the whole question as to what there is about caste which is specifically Hindu. Having started by implying that caste is peculiarly a Pan-Indian phenomenon, he proceeds immediately to the discussion of caste analogues in non-Indian contexts. Clearly he is using the word caste in an ambiguous way but he does not justify this procedure.

The same criticism may be levelled against those 'diffusionist' writers who manage to find historical examples of caste behaviour all the way from Ancient Egypt to modern Fiji (e.g. Hocart 1950; Hutton 1946: chs. IX–XI). They start by assuming that caste is definable as a list of ethnographic traits characteristic of Hindu India and then slide imperceptibly into the assumption that caste refers to certain features of social structure. Such ambiguity is no doubt difficult to avoid, but we need to be clear that it exists.

Definitions of Indian caste have usually taken the form of a list of cultural traits which are supposed to form a syndrome. The authorities, while admitting a great range of detailed variation, have mostly maintained that there is a certain minimal set of primary characteristics which together embody the real essence of caste everywhere; Hutton, for example, holds that normally caste conforms to the following criteria:

- (1) A caste is endogamous.
- (2) There are restrictions on commensality between members of different castes.
- (3) There is a hierarchical grading of castes, the best-recognized position being that of the Brahman at the top.
- (4) In various kinds of context, especially those concerned with food, sex and ritual, a member of a 'high' caste is liable to be 'polluted' by either direct or indirect contact with a member of a 'low' caste.

INTRODUCTION

(5) Castes are very commonly associated with traditional occupations.

(6) A man's caste status is finally determined by the circumstances of his birth, unless he comes to be expelled from his caste for some ritual offence.

(7) The system as a whole is always focused around the prestige accorded to the Brahmans (Hutton 1946: 49 and ch. vi).

Now let us consider our specimen examples. Dr Gough's Tanjore example was explicitly intended to represent a model type. As might be expected we find that Hutton's generalizations apply in full; indeed, in her opening paragraphs, Dr Gough herself defines caste in much the same way. The fact that she refers approvingly (see below, p. 11) and without comment to that very Weberian analysis of caste which I have myself just criticized should not be taken to indicate any major difference in our points of view. It is simply that I have had the advantage of writing last!

The scene of the second essay is Jaffna, a few miles south of Tanjore across the Paik Strait. Here Dr Banks displays the same system modified. The high social status of the Brahmans and of the other ritual 'twice born' has disappeared. The dominant caste, the Vellāla, are not, ritually speaking, 'twice born' at all. Moreover, although the ideology of pollution remains intense, endogamy at the sub-caste level (*sondakara* caste) is an idea rather than a fact, and this leaves room for some degree of intercaste mobility.

For the third essay Dr Yalman takes us 150 miles still further south to the borders of the Kandyan Highlands. Here we are among Buddhist Sinhalese, who might be expected, on religious grounds, to repudiate caste altogether. In fact, although there are no Brahmans and the practical boundaries of sub-caste endogamy are even vaguer than in Jaffna, much of the 'ideology' of caste remains. Endogamy, 'pollution' and rank are ideas on which the local population lays great stress; it is only in the application of these ideas that the pattern becomes atypical. As a description of the small-scale dynamic of a caste system, Dr Yalman's analysis seems to me something of a *tour de force*. In his view, pollution ideology among the Kandyans attaches not so much to occupation and birth status as to family name and place of residence, either of which can be changed at will. He sees the caste phenomenon as the end-product of a voluntary preference for close kin group endogamy, and his essay is largely taken up with a demonstration of why such close endogamy should appear to Kandyans to be the most rational choice of action. There may be places where he overstates his case but this is certainly one of the most illuminating studies of the factors which may govern arranged marriages that I have ever encountered.

His other main emphasis is on the importance for caste systems of the ritual value of names—names of castes, names of people, names of places—and on the possible advantages of changing such names.

This somewhat novel argument deserves careful attention. Name-changing

INTRODUCTION

as an adjunct to changing social status is a phenomenon which we meet with in many societies but I doubt if it is anywhere more systematized than in Ceylon where the process seems to have been at work since the earliest days of European colonization.[1]

The flexibility which such practices imply might suggest that Sinhalese caste is very far removed from the Indian ideal type, but this is not really the case. So far as the Kandyan region is concerned, the typology of labour specialization and the way in which members of different castes are bound together by the obligations of ritual and economic service is entirely in accord with the orthodox Indian pattern. Despite certain peculiarities, Kandyan caste is still caste in the Indian cultural sense of the term and not simply because of a structural analogy. Hocart no doubt overstated his case when he tried to represent the Sinhalese pattern as the prototype of all Indian caste systems (Hocart 1950), but he was not being entirely foolish.

Even so, a comparison of the Jaffna and Kandyan essays brings me back to my original question. The Tamils of Jaffna are Hindus; the Sinhalese of the Kandyan hills are not. Both the Jaffna-ese and the Kandyans have caste systems which are atypical when viewed from an Indian standpoint, but the latter is not notably more aberrant than the former. The deviation of either from Dr Gough's ideal type cannot be attributed merely to the cultural frontiers of language and religion. Are there then elements in normal Indian caste organization which are essentially structural in their nature and independent of Hindu cultural origins?

Finally we come to Dr Barth's paper on the 'caste system' of Swat in North-western Pakistan. In a narrowly cultural sense the pattern here is a good deal further away from the Hindu model. In this case the valuation placed on endogamy, as expressed in pollution behaviour, is relatively low; instead the emphasis is thrown on the linkage of 'caste' with occupation and hierarchical ranking. Also, and this is a very crucial point, 'caste' membership in Swat is derived exclusively by descent from the father and not from the mother—which is the exact reverse of Southern Hindu usage.

In contrast to myself, Dr Barth takes an explicitly 'Weberian' view of caste and treats the Swat *qoum* throughout as a 'status group' rather than as a functional entity with a special distinguishing set of cultural characteristics. He says specifically, 'if the concept of caste is to be useful in sociological analysis, its definition must be based on structural criteria, and not on particular features of the Hindu philosophical scheme' (see below, p. 145). With this view I am myself only partially in agreement. Elsewhere, near the beginning of his essay, Dr Barth notes that 'Swat lies on the edge of the Indian world and partakes to a certain extent of Indian traditions' (see below, p. 115) and he notes how closely similar is the system of labour organization to that of the Hindu *jajmani* system. These similarities seem to me so funda-

INTRODUCTION

mental that structural analogies with societies wholly outside the Indian world are liable to be seriously misleading.

Though I do not entirely agree with Dr Barth on this matter I should point out that his essay represents a highly original expansion of conventional status-group theory. He exploits the concept of *involute systems* proposed by the late Professor Nadel with marked success.

Let me then state my personal opinion. I agree with all the authors of this symposium that each of the systems described is quite properly to be regarded as a 'caste system'. They are caste systems because all of them are similar in certain very fundamental ways to the ideal pattern of Hindu caste organization of which a concrete example is provided in Dr Gough's essay. On the other hand I agree with Dr Barth that this similarity is a matter of structure rather than of culture. There is no syndrome of cultural traits which is common to all the societies concerned; each of Hutton's minimal criteria is missing from one or other of these variant systems.

But where I disagree with Dr Barth (and hence with Weber and those who have followed him) is that I do not accept the view that, because caste is a structural phenomenon, it is therefore a concept which has world-wide application. Caste, in my view, denotes a particular species of structural organization indissolubly linked with what Dumont rightly insists is a Pan-Indian civilization (Dumont 1957 (*c*)). Consequently I believe that those who apply the term to contexts wholly remote from the Indian world invariably go astray. The specific character of caste systems lies in the peculiar nature of the systemic organization itself. Let me elaborate this tautology.

Most conventional Indian ethnographies are written in a way which suggests that individual castes can usefully be considered in isolation. This is deceptive. In fact, a caste does not exist by itself. A caste can only be recognized in contrast to other castes with which its members are closely involved in a network of economic, political and ritual relationships. Furthermore, it is precisely with these intercaste relationships that we are concerned when we discuss caste as a social phenomenon. The caste society as a whole is, in Durkheim's sense, an organic system with each particular caste and subcaste filling a distinctive functional role. It is a system of labour division from which the element of competition among the workers has been largely excluded. The more conventional sociological analysis which finds an analogy between castes, status groups, and economic classes puts all the stress upon hierarchy and upon the exclusiveness of caste separation. Far more fundamental is the economic interdependence which stems from the patterning of the division of labour which is of a quite special type.

It is a characteristic of *class*-organized societies that rights of ownership are the prerogative of minority groups which form privileged élites. The capacity of the upper-class minority to 'exploit' the services of the lower-

INTRODUCTION

class majority is critically dependent upon the fact that the members of the underprivileged group must compete among themselves for the favours of the élite. It is the specific nature of a *caste* society that this position is reversed. Economic roles are allocated by right to closed minority groups of low social status; members of the high-status 'dominant caste', to whom the low-status groups are bound, generally form a numerical majority and must compete among themselves for the services of individual members of the lower 'castes'.

In a class system, social status and economic security go together—the higher the greater; in contrast, in a caste society, status and security are polarized. It is open to every man to become a *sannyasi* and receive the adulations of his society but only at the cost of forgoing all his social rights. Under Ceylon conditions any 'Washerman' or 'Drummer' or 'Blacksmith' or other 'low-caste' individual who wishes to go to the trouble can repudiate his caste but only at the cost of losing those economic rights which accrue automatically to members of 'low-status' groups. In a class society the 'people at the bottom' are those who have been forced there by the ruthless processes of economic competition; their counterparts in a caste society are members of some closely organized kinship group who regard it as their privileged right to carry out a task from which all other members of the total society are rigorously excluded. This is just as true of Swat as of Tanjore.

The point will be clearer perhaps if we consider its negation.

In India today, as Dr Gough's essay exemplifies, a major section of the population consists of landless labourers who stand at the bottom of the social hierarchy. These people are the victims of extreme economic insecurity and are often in violent political revolt against the formal strictures of the caste system. But their economic sufferings are not *due to* their position in the caste system. The low castes suffer economically not because they are low *castes* but because present conditions have turned them into an unemployed working-class. What has put them in this position is not their caste but the recent rapid increase in population, coupled with the fact that the caste rules which formerly compelled the high-status landlords to support their low-status servitors have been progressively destroyed by arbitrary acts of 'liberal' legislation extending over the past 150 years (cf. p. 30).

Everywhere in India and Ceylon today whole caste groups are tending to emerge as political factions but it is misleading to think of such behaviour as a characteristic of caste as such. If a whole caste group plays the role of a political faction by competing with other such factions for some common economic or political goal it thereby acts in defiance of caste tradition. But such change of role may not be clear either to the actors or to the anthropological observer.

If a caste group turns itself into a political faction does it then cease to be a caste? Dr Gough implies that it does (p. 44) and at the end of her essay

INTRODUCTION

(pp. 58–9) she cites the formation of a ‘caste labour union’ as one among many symptoms of caste disintegration, but Dr Yalman (p. 84) cites the formation of a ‘caste welfare society’ as one among many symptoms of caste resilience to changing social circumstance!

My own view is that wherever caste groups are seen to be acting as corporations in competition against like groups of *different caste*, then they are acting in defiance of caste principles. For this reason I find myself in disagreement with a part of Dr Yalman’s stimulating thesis. Dr Yalman treats distinctions in grade within a single named caste as different only in degree from distinctions between separate named castes of separate traditional occupation (pp. 87, 106). It is true that the Sinhalese apply the term *jāti* to both types of grouping, but they seem to me to be different in kind. Caste ideology presupposes that the separation between different named castes is absolute and intrinsic. People of different caste are, as it were, of different species—as cat and dog. There can therefore be no possibility that they should compete for merit of the same sort. But with members of different grades of the same caste, the exact opposite is the case; the grades would not exist unless their members were constantly in competition one against the other. In this respect, grades within a single caste have the nature of social classes rather than of castes.

Thus Dr Yalman’s ingenious argument that the attributes of caste apply to names and places rather than to people and that individuals can be socially mobile even when castes are not, seems to me to skirt around the central issue.

For me, caste *as distinct from either social class or caste grade* manifests itself in the external relations between caste groupings. These relations stem from the fact that *every* caste, not merely the upper élite, has its special ‘privileges’. Furthermore, these external relations have a very special quality since, ideally, they exclude kinship links of all kinds. In this respect all caste systems are similar; where they differ is in the degree to which the boundaries of caste groupings coincide with boundaries of territorial grouping—this last being a variable which I shall not here discuss.

For an anthropologist interested in the comparison of kinship structures there is nothing that is peculiar to Indian caste. Internally, a caste presents itself to its members as a network of kin relationships, but this network is of no specific type. The kinship systems of caste-ordered societies vary, but all types are readily duplicated in other societies historically unconnected with the Indian world. As Morgan discovered, the formal kinship organization of the Tamils is not unlike that of the League of the Iroquois!

The kinship peculiarity of caste systems does not lie in the internal structuring of kinship, but in the total absence of kinship as a factor in extra-caste systemic organization. The cultural rules of caste behaviour establish a dichotomy in the total field of social relationships—political, economic and ritual relations are external, kinship relations are exclusively internal.

INTRODUCTION

In the 'orthodox', ideal type of caste structure this distinction is quite clear, and follows directly from the three caste traits of endogamy, hierarchy and occupational specialization. All relations between persons of the same sub-caste are viewed as kin relationships, all relations between persons of different subcaste are viewed as caste relationships, and the two types of relationship are absolutely exclusive. Even where sex relations across caste boundaries are tolerated this does not entail recognition of cross-caste kinship.

But in the marginal varieties of caste described in this book the dichotomy is an idea rather than a fact. The two categories, caste relationship and kinship relationship, are conceptually separate but not, in practice, *absolutely* exclusive. In Jaffna and Kandyan Ceylon an individual cannot have kinsmen in two different castes at the same time but it does appear that in some exceptional cases an individual may start life in one caste and end up in another. In Swat, the ambiguity between caste occupation and actual occupation, coupled with a general lack of stress on affinal kinship ties, makes such personal mobility even easier. It would appear indeed that in all these societies it is precisely this inconsistency between action and idea which makes individual political action possible.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that because this flexibility occurs in admittedly 'marginal' caste systems, it is necessarily absent from caste systems of 'normal' type. We should not be led into thinking that every deviation from the ideal represents a total breakdown of the system.

In the ideal type, recognition of kinship automatically implies recognition of common caste and recognition of equal social status. Hence, since caste is immutable, social status must be immutable also. Contrariwise, any difference of specialized economic or ritual function automatically implies difference of caste and social status and this difference also is immutable. I am not satisfied that any actual society ever possessed quite this kind of rigidity; the situation described for our 'marginal' cases is much more plausible. Here the opposition between caste and kinship does not in every case unambiguously distinguish social equals from social unequals; instead the system presents itself to the individual as an unstable set of conflicting obligations which call for personal decision.

Dr Banks discusses this issue directly. He shows how individual Jaffna Tamils are subject to a conflict of loyalties. They have duties to their recognized kinsmen (*sondakara* caste); they have duties to their Vellāla overlords and patrons, and they have duties to their local neighbours independently of caste and kinship. On occasions these several obligations may all be directly contradictory. Both in Kandyan Ceylon and in Swat somewhat analogous conditions prevail so that, in all these societies, the art of politics consists in exploiting to one's own advantage these latent conflicts of personal interest.

INTRODUCTION

Thus viewed, caste appears as a very much more flexible type of organization than that which it is commonly supposed to be.

Nevertheless, even though the caste systems of reality lack the absolute rigidity of the ideal type, they always remain hierarchical structures. Even where Brahmans, as such, are lacking, we find that in every case there is one or more clearly defined 'dominant caste' (Pocock 1957) the members of which are in a markedly privileged political position. In the Hindu cultural sense, the Jaffna Vellāla, the Sinhalese Goyigama and the Pakhtun and Saint castes of Swat are none of them 'twice born', but in each case the structural position of these castes corresponds to that of 'twice born' groups in an orthodox Hindu system. In any caste system the factional rivalries among members of the locally privileged caste or castes are likely to be acute, but taken together these local 'twice born' form a high-status corporation for whose benefit the whole of the rest of the system appears to be organized. This is true of all our examples.

In this respect the privilege of dominant castes appears to resemble the privilege of ruling élites everywhere, so we must distinguish.

I have already made a general distinction between caste systems and class systems on the basis of their structural organization, but the case of an aristocracy deserves special attention. There are some respects in which the characteristics of a 'hereditary aristocracy' appear deceptively close to those of a 'dominant caste'.

Like castes, aristocracies everywhere show a marked tendency towards rigorous endogamy. As with caste, the sanctions which support this rule often include a valuation which makes sexual and commensal relations with the lower classes 'polluting'. We can see this in various contemporary 'colour-bar' societies, but the principle is very general. It applied to the ruling class in nineteenth-century England and even to the *aristoi* of Plato's Republic.

Again, it is true of such hereditary aristocracies that they tend, like castes, to maintain a rigid dichotomy between kinship relations and economic relations. In nineteenth-century England, the aristocracy considered it proper to intermarry with the 'professions' but never with those engaged in 'trade'. [2] Anyone with whom an aristocrat had direct financial dealings was automatically contaminated as lower-class no matter what his financial status.

Nevertheless I must insist that the difference between an aristocracy and a dominant caste is fundamental. Aristocratic behaviour is essentially confined to a small ruling clique; it is behaviour which serves to distinguish and separate the rulers from the ruled. In contrast, in a caste system, caste behaviour is something which pervades the whole society. All castes within a given cultural area are based on common fundamental institutions (Dumont 1957(a): iii). Essentially the same rules apply to those at the bottom as to those at the top. Caste therefore does not simply isolate an élite; instead it defines

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INTRODUCTION

the structural role of every sector in a total organic system. Whereas a ruling aristocracy is invariably a numerical minority, a dominant caste may be, and usually is, a majority element in the total population.

It follows that the kind of dominance asserted by individual members of an aristocracy upon individual members of the lower classes is entirely different in quality from intercaste hierarchy, even though both types of relationship are concerned with economic service and even though, in both cases, one of the parties involved is necessarily of 'higher social status' than the other.

I have commented at length upon the special qualities of intercaste relationship because the various contributors, in their treatment of this topic, seem to me particularly illuminating. They have led me to the conclusion that there is something fundamentally wrong about Kroeber's well-known definition: 'A Caste may be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other subdivisions' (Kroeber 1931). It is wrong because it puts the emphasis in the wrong place—upon endogamy and rank, and because it slurs the really crucial fact that caste is a system of interrelationship and that every caste in a caste system has its special privileges.

But the principal concern of these authors is not with definition. Each essay has its own individual merits which are both sociologically and ethnographically important. Here I must leave the reader to judge for himself.

NOTES

[1] *Ferguson's Ceylon Directory 1954* lists around 6000 'men's addresses'. These include almost everyone who has any kind of political or economic influence in the country. About 4000 of the names are those of Sinhalese but of these rather less than half are of Sinhalese style. Virtually all such true Sinhalese names indicate respectable caste status. The other Sinhalese in the *Directory* mostly have names of Portuguese form such as Perera (400), de Silva (350), Fernando (300), which give no indication of caste status. Such names have originated in the past as a function of the kind of social mobility described by Dr Yalman.

[2] 'Professions' were clergy of the Church of England, naval and military officers, barristers-at-law. In the English legal system a barrister has no direct financial dealings with his client. The practice of endogamy was less strict than the theory; wealthy brewers and bankers especially were deemed to be respectable.