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## *Introduction*

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It has been two decades since the publication in this series of *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon, and North-West Pakistan* (E.R. Leach, ed., 1960), a collection of important ethnographic and analytical papers which provided an impetus for further study of South Asian systems of caste organization. In the intervening years both the ethnographic record and the range of theoretical frameworks to interpret data on caste systems have so greatly expanded that it would be quite possible today to convene a collection of papers dealing with any one of many specialized 'aspects of caste' currently under investigation. The unit of study has continued to diversify over the period, so that reports of localized village caste hierarchies have been supplemented by studies of regional caste organization and longitudinal studies of caste mobility through time. Yet, despite the increasing diversity of empirical work, the compelling patterns of similarity and variation in caste systems throughout the region continue to nourish efforts to discover a single pan-Indic rationale, or cultural logic, which could be seen to underly all manifestations of caste organization.

Broadly speaking, the essays in this volume challenge the uniformity and consistency of indigenous 'caste ideologies' in different South Asian fieldwork settings, while at the same time seeking to trace how these ideologies impinge upon the actual patterns of group interaction observable in South Asian life. The term 'ideology' in this context has entered South Asian anthropology through the work of Louis Dumont, and it is used here to refer to a coherent and systematic set of indigenous ideas, assumptions, and values which inform, shape, and give meaning to a broad range of social institutions. In the papers which follow, 'caste ideology' should be understood to include, but not necessarily be limited to, the specific ideology of purity and varnaic hierarchy which uniquely defines the Hindu caste system for Dumont. The second theme of this volume is 'interaction', by which is meant communicative behaviour in the broadest sense. It would refer to social interaction which is either direct or indirect, private or public, although in real-life situations such distinctions tend to

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be blurred. However, the term interaction is particularly meant to suggest the behaviourally-situated aspects of caste and the competitive nature of actual caste systems in operation.

At the moment, there appear to be two major approaches to the global interpretation of South Asian society from the point of view of the South Asian cultural heritage itself, the first being that of Louis Dumont. His insightful and synoptic work has consistently enjoined anthropologists to recognize a unity of structural principles in South Asian society: namely, a presumption of universal group hierarchy and a strict separation of secular authority (power) from religious status (purity), of which caste is said to be the most pervasive and telling expression (Dumont 1970). More recently, McKim Marriott and others have proposed a new 'ethnosociological' or 'monistic' interpretation of South Asian society which is said to have greater cultural validity and more general applicability throughout the region. This approach detects a deeper and more universalizing mode of South Asian thought which views castes as part of a unified hierarchy of natural and social 'species', each caste mutually defined and sustained through the asymmetric exchange of morally-encoded substances (Marriott 1976a; Marriott and Inden 1977; for a further explanation of this theory see also McGilvray *infra*, section 2.1).

A critical assessment of the methodological and empirical foundations of these particular theories is taken up to some extent in each of the four papers in this volume, together with a critique by Hawthorn of the assumption, typified in the approach of the political scientist Rajni Kothari, that caste identity is a major motivating factor in modern Indian politics. Despite an acknowledgement of the need for the study of local variation, both the Dumontian and the 'ethnosociological' approaches pursue a hypothesis of Indic unity, a single uniquely South Asian formulation of reality, an ideology which is *the* essence of India. While these attempts seek the important goal of sociological generalization, they both adopt special criteria of 'authenticity' in their assessment of the empirical evidence. Dumont sees the ideology of textually orthodox dualistic Brahman/Kshatriya varna systems as genuine, while variant or incomplete systems are merely 'quasi-caste'. The ethnosociologists link their interpretation of the ideology of 'coded substance' to specific textual sources of medical and legal theory whose impact on social thought may be partial or uneven in some areas of South Asia. None of this precludes further research, but the tendency to emphasize the study of atemporal pan-Indic caste ideology does detract from the study of regionally-defined and historically-grounded caste systems as functioning sociological entities, regardless of

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whether, from an *a priori* definitional point of view, they exhibit caste or merely quasi-caste, a belief in 'bio-moral substance' or nothing of the kind.

It was the wish to re-establish a degree of methodological contact with human actors situated in local caste systems, interacting with others and seeking to make sense of their own social institutions, which provided the initial focus of interest around which this volume developed. All four of the contributors participated in the research seminar on 'Hierarchy and Interaction' held during 1976–7 in the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, out of which grew the final versions of the papers they have presented here. One of the more important intellectual starting points for this seminar was the transactional analysis of inter-caste food prestations developed by Marriott (1959; 1968a). Thus the 'interactional' slant and the emphasis on caste hierarchies rather than on class relations were intentionally chosen as major foci of our papers from the start, although Geoffrey Hawthorn's essay, with its analysis of rural 'political class' alliances, is an exception. Two of the contributors conducted field-work in ethnic or religious minority communities in Sri Lanka – Stirrat in the west coast Sinhalese Catholic settlements near Chilaw, McGilvray in the east coast Tamil Hindu and Moorish (Muslim) region of Batticaloa – and their papers follow the precedent for Sri Lankan research established by Leach, Yalman, and Banks in the 1960 *Aspects of Caste* volume. Levinson's data were collected in the well-documented Hindu hamlet of Ōlappālayam in the Konku region of western Tamilnadu, South India (Beck 1972), while Hawthorn's discussion is taken from the perspective of modern Indian political processes as a whole.

The papers in this volume assess some of the existing work on the theory of caste, and several of them present considerable new data. At the same time, it is possible to detect some general findings which emerge from the book as a whole.

1. *The polyvocal aspects of caste rank.* The constellation of behavioural traits commonly identified with the operation of local caste hierarchies, including asymmetrical inter-caste transactions in food and drink, asymmetrical removal of wastes, caste endogamy or hypergamy, differential access to domestic and ritual space, order of precedence or seating in public events, display of honorific or stigmatizing symbols of office or profession, sumptuary rules, expressions of honour and deference in verbal interaction, and so forth, can be surprisingly versatile and polyvocal markers of social rank. While they unambiguously convey assertions of relative superiority and inferiority – and this is clearly their intent – they do not unambiguously express the dimension or aspect of social rank

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which is being claimed. Honour, after all, can be deserved in many ways. Several of the papers in this volume show that some classic South Asian tactics for asserting and maintaining caste rank are compatible with different indigenous views of what that rank *represents*. Levinson's detailed measurement of the highly systematic patterns of inter-caste verbal politeness (or lack thereof) reveals a uniform language of rank which is highly effective in defining the local caste hierarchy, but he notes that the precise significance of the ranks – the ideology which renders it meaningful in local terms – is contentious, probably split between the ideals of the 'left-hand' and the 'right-hand' caste divisions, and in any case, unnecessary to an understanding of how the ranks in general are established behaviourally. McGilvray's paper, which explores the variety of conscious justifications for caste in a regional system which lacks Brahmans, reveals that the 'orthodox' ideology of collective purity and pollution which is so often said to rationalize caste hierarchies in other Hindu areas is, in eastern Sri Lanka, replaced by a 'secular' ideology of kingly honour, feudal division of labour, and matrilineal law. And yet, within the limitations of a distinctive social structure, the outward manifestations of inter-caste behaviour here are indistinguishable from patterns reported from South Indian regions where caste purity seems more to dominate popular consciousness.

On the other hand, Stirrat's account of ideas about caste in a Sinhalese Catholic fishing village seems to illustrate a movement away from a firmly centred caste ideology of any kind, allowing people to invoke a variety of poorly integrated themes in discussions of caste, including the antiquity of caste settlements, the relative prestige of caste occupations (farming vs. fishing), the aristocratic cachet of certain caste-linked *vasagama* names, and the 'metaphorical' purity of caste blood. The interpretation of caste membership in Stirrat's Wellagoda is a matter of considerable personal discretion, and the overall level of concern with such matters is low. Yet the elements of a caste debate can be mustered when needed, as at the time of a controversial marriage. It is also interesting to note that both Stirrat and McGilvray have detected strongly unilineal ideas of caste membership, patrilineal on the west coast and matrilineal on the east coast, which deviate from the usual belief in bilateral caste descent.

Empirically it seems that the two major themes around which South Asian caste-rank symbolism is organized are those of religious status (purity, priestly descent, sacred knowledge, etc.) and of feudal-style patronage and service (kingship, allocated division of labour, hereditary servitude, etc.), although these two motifs may be linked, as in the ideal of kingly supervision of religious institutions which McGilvray notes in

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eastern Sri Lanka. What is striking is how often the same rank-generating caste interactions can be validated in terms of *both* of these ideologies. Downward distribution of food and refusal to accept food upward makes sense as a tactic to protect and enhance bodily purity, but it can also be seen as a gesture of *noblesse oblige* and a statement of position as patron and protector. Caste endogamy conserves the purity of the group, if you care to see it that way, but it can also symbolize notions of inherited honour and the limits to intimacy which uphold the dignity of political authority. Sumptuary rules can be seen as enforcing an outward indexical display of the gradations of inward spiritual status of ranked castes, or they can be justified as a chartered form of privilege, a prerogative of feudal office. Even Hindu priestly castes, whose privileged access to the innermost temple sanctum proclaims their unequivocal superiority in religious status, may find their role denigrated as one of humble 'service' or subordination in relation to the authority of the non-priestly groups who control the management of a temple. Further examples might be adduced, but the point is to suggest that the perceived meaning of caste interaction in actual South Asian settings is capable of a great deal of pragmatic and historically contingent polyvocality, making a unitary ideology of caste difficult to establish on a pan-Indic ethnographic basis and illustrating instead the scope for dynamic variation in symbolic emphasis between regional caste systems and even between the perspectives of different groups within a local caste hierarchy.

2. *Some insights from the interaction perspective.* Careful attention to the patterns of interaction in ongoing caste systems reveals some of the psychological reality of caste-ranking manoeuvres and of the categories of meaning with which they are associated, but it also brings out some of the more subtle and unnoticed patterns of individual motivation and group alliance which a formal ideology of caste rank would not predict. Levinson's paper exploits the methodological advantages of aggregate interaction research by choosing to monitor one medium of social exchange, the use of honorific and dishonorific forms of address, which helps to confirm and to sustain the local ranking of castes on a day-to-day basis. As Levinson notes, linguistic interaction is highly public, its meaning is independently testable, and it is 'the most frequent form of exchange', all of which make it an extremely sensitive indicator, not of people's private aspirations, but of their publicly ratified achievements in asserting caste rank. Levinson carefully sifts his data on pronouns and honorifics through a sequence of separate matrices to reveal a pattern of caste hierarchy more complex and more subtle than traditional ethnographic

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techniques would be likely to reveal. Verbal deference on the basis of the relative age of the interacting individuals is itself shown to be an important and systematic marker of caste-bloc solidarity and rank. Furthermore, the existence of allied caste-blocs within the overall hierarchy of castes is demonstrated by Levinson's matrices to be a significant aspect of local caste systems, one which may permit a group to offer alliance in one interactional medium in order to gain rank in another.

The nature and degree of solidarity among allied castes is a phenomenon which merits comparative study across regions of South Asia. In some parts of eastern Sri Lanka, as McGilvray reports, the alliance between two dominant landowning castes is given explicit mythic justification and is publicly ratified by reciprocal cross-caste marriage. Yet in the same region there is also a highly ritualized interactional display of caste and matriclan rank in terms of unequal 'shares' (specialized participation rights) in communal temple and mosque ceremonies. In Wellagoda, Stirrat's fieldwork site on the west coast of the island, the salient arenas of caste interaction are much more personal and informal; in fact, one must examine the day-to-day content of gossip and the language of petty dispute in order to discover what the recurring themes of local caste ideology actually are.

Both Stirrat and McGilvray emphasize the importance of acquiring more complete data on the range of ethnosemantic categories, the relevant social contexts, and the actual expressions of speech encountered in the ethnographic search for evidence of such anthropological concepts as 'purity' or 'bio-moral substance', or even local oral recensions of such textual themes as *karma* and *dharma*. In the cases reported here, the vocabulary of ordinary village discourse on such matters, even in the specialized domain of ethnomedical knowledge, proved to be more disjunctive and equivocal than the prevailing theories of Indic rationality would have suggested. At the same time, both Levinson and McGilvray agree that the two-dimensional model of inter-caste transaction strategies which accompanies Marriott's 'ethnological' theory of Hindu thought is both insightful and productive.

Approaching caste interaction not from the perspective of fieldwork observation but instead 'from above', from the standpoint of the long-term imposition of specific rules and conditions on local political behaviour, Hawthorn argues that caste loyalty within local and regional political alliances is less a primordial sentiment grounded in traditional Indian social structure than a byproduct of colonial idealizations and rigidifications of the caste system introduced with the British Raj. Indeed, given this colonial

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penchant for legitimizing caste rights and caste boundaries where formerly there had been a more fluid and holistic Dumontian system of structural relations between castes, Hawthorn finds it surprising to observe how *relatively free* of caste sentiment post-Independence Indian politics has been, the dire predictions of some eminent political scientists notwithstanding. The one-party structure of the Indian system during most of the Independence period so defined and constituted the setting within which political interaction took place that pursuit of interests on the exclusive basis of caste identity was largely unproductive. Hawthorn says the system did create a 'political class' of dominant landlord caste members who proceeded to reinforce their traditional sources of caste authority both politically and economically. Thus, dominant caste identity was often enhanced and became linked to the fortunes of the Congress machine, but this was the inadvertent result of an agrarian-based one-party political system, not a product of caste as an underlying motive for political action. If Hawthorn's reading of the evidence is valid, it provides an important perspective on caste ideology and interaction, one which demonstrates again the 'compartmentalization' effect and which suggests that the extension of caste sentiment into different realms of life can be greatly reduced by the prevailing rules governing culturally distinct domains of interaction.

Altogether, the emphasis in these essays is upon matters of localized variation and contextual detail, linked to broader criticism of contemporary theory and method. They seek to widen the field of comparison in the study of caste, not to promote a sterile *empiricism atomisant* (Dumont 1979: xxxi). While each of the four papers must be judged independently, this broader intent is shared among them all.

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## *Caste conundrums: Views of caste in a Sinhalese Catholic fishing village*

*R.L. Stirrat*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Once, when I was talking about caste with one of the last Italian missionary priests in Sri Lanka, Father Rastoldo,<sup>1</sup> he mentioned to me that caste was only important for the rich and for the low castes. For most Catholics in the country who are neither very rich nor of very low caste, such matters are of relatively minor importance. In my own experience of Catholicism in Sinhalese Sri Lanka, I have found Father Rastoldo's comments to be generally correct. Sometimes people are willing and even eager to talk about caste. Sometimes, no one displays the least interest in an institution which many observers see as being central to South Asian society.

#### 1.1. Aims

In this paper I am concerned with one village which I have christened 'Wellagoda' and which lies on the coast about 50 miles north of Colombo. The village is entirely Catholic, most of the households depend directly on fishing, and people claim to belong either to the Karāva or the Goyigama castes. But for most villagers most of the time, caste is an unimportant matter. In contrast with the impression one often gets when reading descriptions of caste in South Asian villages, caste is not something which affects Wellagoda people on a day-to-day basis. The unimportance of caste in this village seems to me to make the Wellagoda material of some interest in itself, and of some more general interest for the light it may throw on our understanding of caste.

In the present context I cannot hope to explain or account for caste, the peculiarities of caste, or the relative absence of caste in Wellagoda. Such an enterprise would appear to me to require a persuasive general analysis of caste in Sri Lanka including the impact of Catholicism. These as yet do not exist. So what I shall do here is to produce an account of caste



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as it is seen by the people of Wellagoda. Straight away I must point out that their notions of caste are somewhat confusing and thus at times this paper may appear somewhat confused. Yet this confusion is in itself crucial to caste in Wellagoda and any attempt to avoid it would, I think, amount to a bowdlerization of the data and a misrepresentation of the actual situation.

In summary, I shall argue that, in Wellagoda, caste is divorced from notions of purity, impurity, pollution and so on. Rather, the notion of caste in an extremely simple form exists in itself as part of a segmentary and holistic notion of society. This in turn is related to ideas about the past and stands in contrast to the flux, fluidity and essentially individualistic nature of actual social relations today. But before developing the argument, let me make a few general comments relevant to Wellagoda.

**1.2. The background**

Today, Catholics form around 8% of the total population of Sri Lanka. The greatest concentration of Catholics is found in a narrow coastal strip, never more than three or four miles wide, running north from Colombo for about 50 miles. Further north Catholics still form a major proportion of the population but in absolute terms are less numerous.

Catholicism was introduced into Sri Lanka in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese. It would appear that most of the early conversions were based on converting the leaders of the local population, the masses following in their wake (Abeyasinghe 1966: 200 *passim*; De Silva 1972; Tennent 1850). And it would also appear that many of the conversions were made on a caste basis. This seems especially true for the Karāva caste who today form the largest caste category among the west-coast Catholic population (Ryan 1953). In all, at least fourteen different castes are represented amongst the Catholics in this area.

Wellagoda is situated towards the northern end of this Catholic strip. Historically, the village appears to have grown up in the late nineteenth century. Writers earlier in the century refer to the area around Wellagoda as being particularly wild, infested with elephants and other dangerous creatures (e.g. Percival 1805: 108). But this picture changed rapidly with the spread of commercial coconut production northwards along the coast, and the necessary influx of a labouring population. The foundation of Wellagoda seems to have been the result of a growing market for fish among the local population. The first historical mention of the village I have found is in 1888 when the Government Agent wrote in his diary that

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he was having difficulty in collecting the 'wadiya tax' from migrant fishers using the beach at Wellagoda.

At some point, probably in the 1890s, some of these migrant fishermen who camped on Wellagoda beach for a few months each year began to settle down, buy land and build houses. These people were mainly members of the Karāva caste from Negombo who spoke Tamil although claiming to be Sinhalese. Whether or not there were already other settlers in Wellagoda is unclear. Today, besides those villages who claim a Negombo ancestry and sometimes still refer to Negombo as *ūr* (Tamil: 'home village'), there are others, both Karāva and Goyigama, who claim either to be descended from autochthonous inhabitants of Wellagoda, or to have originated in other areas of the coastal belt. In general those who do not claim a Negombo ancestry claim to have always been Sinhalese speakers.

In 1971, the population of Wellagoda was something over 700, forming around 140 households, although today (1979) there must be well over 160 households in the village. Of the 140 households in 1971, 100 depended directly on fishing whilst the remainder of the population was involved in a motley collection of jobs: teachers, clerks, labourers, a few boutique keepers, and a few who had no visible means of support.

Elsewhere (Stirrat 1975b) I have discussed at length the social organization of fishing in Wellagoda. What is significant in the present context is that economic activity in this village is highly individualistic. The techniques of production and the nature of the productive enterprise are such that all fishing households own the fishing gear that they use. The household is the basic unit of economic activity and relations between households are generally highly competitive. Fortunes rapidly change, the rich of one generation producing the paupers of the next. There is no fixed economic ranking system, and villagers view wealth as being, unfortunately, a transient quality.

In caste terms, everyone in Wellagoda claims to be either Karāva or Goyigama although, as I shall show later, these claims are not always acknowledged by others in the village. The Karāva form the majority of the population, 83.4% (593 out of 711) in 1971. Despite the residential absence of other castes in the village, Wellagoda people do come into contact with such people. The men either frequent the Barbers' (*Panikki*) saloons or use the barber who comes every Saturday to the village. There are a couple of Washermen (*Radā*) families who come to the village, particularly for the girls' puberty rituals (*kotahala gedera*) and occasionally to supply white cloths at weddings. And finally Wellagoda people obtain arrack from Limeburners (*Huru*) who live across the lagoon from the village.