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Marvin Davis

Excerpt

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Introduction

Stated initially, and somewhat over-simply, this study is a descriptive analysis of rank – relative highness and lowness – and those rivalries by which distinctions of rank and the behavior appropriate to ranked social units are variously maintained or altered, supported or challenged, in a village of West Bengal, India. The study aims partly to add to the general fund of ethnographic information about stratification and politics in rural India, and partly to advance the kind of analysis undertaken. With regard to this latter and more polemical aim, it is argued that a holistic anthropology is best concerned with both systems of action and meaning, and best examines social structural and cultural material in a manner that does not treat either as in some sense secondary, derived or epiphenomenal.

Hindu culture includes the premise of inequality. Hindu society is organized around ascriptive groupings of people into ranked families, lineages and castes. On this Indianists are generally agreed. It is also agreed that social position within a hierarchy of families, lineages or castes – to borrow from Weber – depends on considerations of status rather than of class or power. No similar agreement exists, however, on the specific criterion of rank, the basis of inequality, among Hindu status groups. The disagreements are particularly evident and have been debated most heatedly in discussions of caste, the primary unit of social organization in rural India. Attributional theorists like H.N.C. Stevenson (1954), for example, emphasize the physical nature of a caste and its placement along a continuum of purity and impurity, with the more pure castes held to rank above the less pure. Interactional theorists emphasize the exchange between castes of culturally valued foods and services, with the givers of food held to rank above the receivers, and the receivers of service held to rank above the givers. Here it is not the religious standard of purity and impurity, but behavioral dominance that seems to be at issue (Marriott 1959; 1968). Louis Dumont's (1970) purity-plus-power argument represents still a third perspective, in which the attributional element of purity is qualified by the interactional element of power, which it nevertheless

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'encompasses.' Each of these perspectives offers a different evaluation of physical nature and culturally coded behavior as the criterion of caste rank. Yet all are alike in treating physical nature and behavioral codes as distinct and separate features.

The relative merits of attributional, interactional and purity-plus-power perspectives are a matter of long-standing discussion.¹ Of all the criticism that can be justly leveled against each perspective, though, perhaps the most telling derives from a series of writings by Ronald Inden (1976) on marriage and rank among Brahmans and Kayasthas in middle-period Bengal, Inden and Ralph Nicholas (1977) on kinship in Bengali culture, and McKim Marriott and Inden (1974; 1977) on South Asian caste systems generally. Writing about Hindus at various times in history, and in various parts of South Asia, these authors suggest that physical nature and behavioural codes are not, as they have been treated, distinct and separate features. Unlike our own dualistic conception of the natural and the cultural (Schneider 1968), Hindus regard physical nature and behavioral codes as cognitively non-dualistic features. Each is immanent in the other; each is inseparable from the other; each is a reflection and realization of the other.

The evidence from Torkotala, a (pseudonymously named) village in West Bengal, also suggests that neither physical nature nor behavioral codes are the sole or even the primary criterion of caste rank in Hindu society. Instead, the rank of any caste depends mutually on its nature and code. But what kind of theory can account for the physical and the behavioral, the natural and the cultural, as a duplex criterion of caste rank? And given the great breadth of ideas like the natural and the cultural, are physical nature and behavioral codes the criterion of caste rank only? Or does the same duplex criterion apply to other social units as well? If so, what does this reveal about rank in Hindu society as a whole?

These are among the questions raised in the first half of this study, chapters 1 through 3, which offers a descriptive analysis of rank in the Bengali cosmos and society. To preview their contents briefly, chapter 1 examines the ecology and social composition of Torkotala and the surrounding kingdom, and provides an initial account of their administration and local history. This places the study in space and time, and introduces its human subjects. It also sets an immediate limitation to the scope of this study, for while Torkotala is seen to have a mixed population of caste Hindus and tribals, the land, people and social history of Torkotala are described almost entirely from the perspective of Hindus as they introduce themselves and their village in terms of the Bengali concept *des* or community. This is not to deny that many differences in perspective exist among caste Hindus and tribals, or to underestimate the importance of studying intra-cultural variability. But in the discussion of *des*, as

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throughout most of this study, the insider's perspective presented is, unless specially noted, that of caste Hindus. Unqualified reference to 'Bengalis,' as a result, may be read as referring to Bengali Hindus.

Chapter 2 begins a description of the Bengali cosmos and society in local, cultural terms. It also begins an expanded ethnography of rank that moves beyond the usual focus on caste as a unique institutional system of inequality to a recognition that Bengalis view the several worlds of the universe, the various life forms that inhabit those worlds, and all birth groups into which humans in society are divided, as organized into a series of ranked orders and ordered ranks; individuals, too, though the subject of individuals is not considered until chapter 3. Brief mention of a few generalizations drawn from this ethnography will provide an overview of the argument made.

Bengalis describe the several worlds of the universe as extending up and down along a north-south axis that transverses the entire cosmos and is topped by Brahma, the creator of the universe and all that is manifest within it, at its northernmost point. Each world of the universe is ranked according to its relative proximity to Brahma, with the higher, more northerly worlds ranking above the lower, more southerly worlds.

Inhabiting the several worlds of the universe are six kinds of life forms – gods, humans, demons, animals, plants and objects – which occupy a place and rank in the universe according to the extent to which their own defining features approximate those of Brahma.

The same premise of ranked inequalities which informs Bengali perceptions of the several worlds and various life forms of the universe also informs Bengali perceptions of the birth groups (*jati*) into which humans in society are divided, including categories of castes (*varna*), the interactional groups we call castes, and the more highly differentiated kinship units included within castes. It is in this sense that rank is an ordering principle of the Bengali cosmos and society as a whole.

The various *varna*, castes and kinship units into which humans in society are divided are all defined by their radical material substances (*gun*) or physical nature and the moral conduct or behavioral code (*dharma*) held appropriate to that nature, which are viewed by Bengalis as a single, if duplex, criterion of rank. Both *gun* and *dharma* are inherent in and directly imply the other. The rank of any birth group, as a result, can be demonstrated by its physical nature or its behavioral code. One is but the reflection and realization of the other. It is in this sense that attributional, interactional, and purity-plus-power theories of rank are unified by the recognition that nature and code, when understood in local, cultural terms, are not distinct and separate, but cognitively non-dualistic features.

The defining features, and thus the rank, of all human birth groups are not fixed and unchanging over time, but can be transformed for better or

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worse through the life activities of its members. It is in this sense that a unified theory of rank is also transformational, and that a transformational perspective reveals the internal dynamic by which the ordered ranks of Bengali society are continuously subject to flux. Included in chapter 2 is also a discussion of how the premise of ranked inequalities and the ideas which inform a transformational theory of rank are evidenced behaviorally in such acts as marriage, diet, food exchanges, and work.

The ethnography of rank begun in chapter 2 is extended still further in chapter 3 with a discussion of the individual (*lok*) in Bengali thought and action. Are individuals properly considered units of rank among Hindus? If so, are they defined and ranked by the same features of nature and code as are the more inclusive birth groups to which they belong? Can the defining features, and thus the rank, of individuals be transformed in much the same way and through similar acts as, say, those of castes? These are among the questions raised in chapter 3. In pursuing them the discussion completes the argument for a transformational theory of rank begun in chapter 2. It also aims to clarify the place and importance of individuals in a group-oriented India.

Louis Dumont (1970:1–20; for earlier statements see 1965a, 1965b, 1967) has argued that the individual as an elemental social unit, and the normative subject of thought and action, exists only in modern countries of the West, with their values of equality and liberty, and should not be considered a universal. In Hindu India, as in other traditional societies, Dumont holds, individual identities are submerged in the social groups to which they belong, while individual interests are subordinated to society as a whole, which bears primary value. Thus the individual only becomes an elemental unit in group-oriented India in the person of the world renouncer, the *sannyasin*, who, paradoxically, realizes his individuality in the effort to step outside society and merge with Brahma. Under all other circumstances it is the various birth groups to which an individual belongs – his family, lineage and especially his caste – which are the normative subject of institutions in Hindu society, and also the units of rank.

Modern individualism and traditional holism may well be opposed configurations. But any actual society, including that of Hindu India, can include both sides of this structural opposition, even when they are differently valued. To minimize or abbreviate the discussion of individuals because they are not the primary social unit in Hindu India, as Dumont does, is thus to leave unexamined the individuality of ‘encompassed’ persons. It is also to ignore the analytic problem posed by questioning the place and importance of individuals in a group-oriented society.

To explain more fully, it is the overriding importance of status groups like family, lineage and especially caste that marks Hindu society as group-

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oriented, while it is the preoccupation with ranking such groups that marks Hindu society as hierarchical. Membership in a ranked family, lineage, or caste is only one kind of positioning relevant to systems of social stratification though, and does not in itself situate individuals within the status groups to which they belong. Everyone within a corporate family or caste shares the same rank in relation to outsiders. But within the family or caste individual members still can be differentiated and are differently valued. To refer to the ranked position of an individual among others who share a common status, the sociologist Benoit–Smullyan (1944) used the term ‘situs.’ When added to the usual concern of Indianists with ranked status groups, an attention to situs may provide an analytic key to the opposition individualism–holism. Does the individual exist in holistic India?

As detailed in chapter 3, the evidence from Torkotala suggests that individual Bengalis retain a personal identity, have distinguishable self-interests, pursue their self-development, and can be ranked quite apart from any of the inclusive birth groups to which they belong. Individuals, in sum, have a situs different from their status as a caste member or any other status deriving from membership in a family or larger kinship grouping. Further, individuals are at times the normative subject of thought and action. Bengali Hindus regard the individual as a microcosm of the universe at large. The same processes of development that are general to the universe are replicated in the physical-cum-moral development of an individual. The same premise of ranked inequalities that orders the birth groups into which persons in Hindu society are divided applies as well to individuals. And, like the groups of which they are members, individuals undergo transformations of their defining physical nature and behavioral codes in accord with their own life activities. Included in chapter 3 is a discussion of these processes of individual development and transformation as evidenced in passage through a prescribed series of life-cycle rites and life stages.

The descriptive analysis of rank presented in the first half of this study proceeds at first through a cultural analysis of the sort identified with David Schneider (1968) and, among Indianists, with Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas (1977), but with differences. For Schneider, as for Inden and Nicholas, culture is defined as a system of symbols, a definition derived from works by Talcott Parsons, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber (cf. Parsons and Shills 1961; Kroeber and Parsons 1958; Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). A symbol is defined, following Suzanne Langer (1960), as one thing that stands for another. If this view of culture were accepted literally, it would focus study on the vehicle or conveyer of meaning, the symbol, rather than on what is conveyed by symbols, and would thus misrepresent what is typically done in the name of cultural analysis. It

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would seem both more useful and more accurate, as a result, to define culture as a system of meaning. Or to elaborate, in this study culture refers to that complex assemblage of concepts and ideas, premises and understandings that constitute a system of meaning shared and transmitted by a group of people. Culture is conveyed through symbols, be they words or deeds.²

The component concepts and ideas that constitute a system of meaning may pertain to a single domain, such as religion or politics, or may pertain across domains. Portions of a system of meaning may also be more general or less general, in that some premises and understandings are shared by all within a society, while others are shared and transmitted by persons representing a segment of the whole society. Segmental meaning systems, and the relations between religion and politics as organizing cultural frames, are discussed in the second half of this study (chapters 4 and 5). Chapters 2 and 3 focus first on those concepts and ideas, premises and understandings of rank shared by all Bengali Hindus. The aim is to identify the basic units of the Bengali cosmos and society, how they are defined and differentiated locally, and how they are related one to the other in a peculiar construction – a Bengali construction – of reality. The effort, put differently, is to discover the system of meaning within which Bengalis perceive and interpret matters of rank, and to do so in cognitive terms that are used and understood by Bengalis in talking about their own cosmos and society.

At first glance an approach that seeks to describe a particular construction of reality in its own cognitive terms may appear tautological. It is not, as the analysis presented in chapters 1 through 3 should demonstrate. But an analogy made now may help clarify the strategy of cultural analysis that unfolds later. Physical scientists describe how the combinations and products of a limited number of atomic particles – neutrons, protons, electrons, etc. – result in all the various known elements, and how these elements – hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, etc. – may be differently combined to produce all the world's known objects, both organic and inorganic. In this way the material universe is seen as resulting from the combinations and products of a few basic units, and at each level of synthesis are the new and more complex units defined in terms of other, more simple units. In the same way does a cultural analysis seek to describe how the Bengali cosmos and society is constructed from the various combinations and products of a few basic cultural units, among them *des*, *jati*, and *lok*. This is to define a cosmos and society in its own terms, but after the pattern of physical scientists searching for the material (here conceptual) building blocks of the universe.

This said, it still may be asked if an effort to describe the Bengali cosmos and society in local, cognitive terms is not flawed on other grounds. Does a

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strict cultural analysis preclude the possibility of a comparative social science? Does such an analysis allow for the possibility of cross-cultural generalizations? It does, as the less ethnocentric ethnography towards which a cultural analysis strives allows for more accurate comparative statements and more truly universalistic definitions as well. A better emic, as Goodenough (1970: 98–130) has argued, allows for a better etic. Supporting evidence for this position is provided throughout the study, but of particular relevance in chapters 1 through 3 is the discussion of why certain universalistic definitions of clan and lineage do not apply exactly in Bengal, and why the Bengali family is not accurately defined either by the husband and wife as a minimal pair, or, following Goodenough, by the central importance of the mother. The whole of chapter 3, as already noted, bears on Dumont's argument that the individual is not a universal unit of comparison. Though not pursued in this study, a culturally informed ethnography of rank may also advance the comparison of caste, class and race as systems of social stratification, if only in clarifying how physical nature and behavioral codes are in some systems separate criteria of status and in others a single, if duplex, criterion.

Another and more biting criticism of the kind of cultural analysis identified with Schneider, and with Inden and Nicholas, is the observation that a system of meaning once uncovered, however internally consistent and elegant, is not readily verified. Also, a strict cultural analysis does not in itself consider actual patterns of behavior. These observations are not unrelated, for if the Bengali view of their cosmos and society as ordered by ranked inequalities was shown to inform ongoing social acts and situations, then this might well stand as a test for the cultural analysis through which the concern about rank and inequality was uncovered. It would also reveal something of the nexus between *systems of meaning* – the complex assemblage of ideas, concepts, and understandings that constitute culture – and *systems of action* – the network of personal and group relationships and related processual acts that constitute social structure. With this in mind, chapters 2 and 3 depart from a strict cultural analysis, considered incomplete in itself, to include also discussion of how the Bengali concern with rank at a cultural level is evident socially in patterns of marriage, diet, food exchange, work, and ritual observance, including those life-cycle rites that mark the physical-cum-moral development of individual Bengalis as they move through a series of life stages.

In departing from a strict cultural analysis, the ethnographic effort is to document the pervasive and fundamental importance of ranked inequalities to Bengalis, not only for how they conceptualize their cosmos and society abstractly, but also for how they conduct their day-to-day lives. The effort also is to argue by example for a particular view of the anthropological enquiry. Systems of meaning can be distinguished

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analytically from systems of action and studied separately, as Schneider has done for kinship in American culture and Inden and Nicholas have done for kinship in Bengali culture. Systems of action can also be studied in analytic isolation. But as the questions that mainly concern anthropologists are only partly about cultures as systems of meaning, and only partly about social systems as systems of action, such separate treatment may be of limited value. It may also be misleading, for social action of all sorts is in an important sense unintelligible apart from its cultural context, and to focus solely on the substantive content of meaning systems overlooks what is probably the essential functional role of culture: its role in directing and justifying action preferences. Social acts, in turn, have a role in affirming or denying a system of meaning. Systems of meaning and action, in sum, though analytically separable, are interdependent and do affect each other. As they are also experienced by actor and observer as a single, intertwined, inexorably related whole, a holistic anthropology is best concerned with both.

The research on which this study is based was planned as an exercise in political anthropology. Yet the report of that research begins with a rather extensive ethnography of rank. Why? Because it is the Bengali concern, even preoccupation, with ranked inequalities that defines the broad context of meaning in which political competitions in rural West Bengal are engendered, fought and won, or lost. Also, it is in part through political competitions that the ranked orders and ordered ranks of the Bengali cosmos and society are variously maintained or altered, supported or challenged. The second half of this study, chapters 4 and 5, examines this conjunction of rank and rivalry in detail. The aim is partly to advance what is known about politics in rural India, and partly to further the argument for a holistic anthropology by illustrating how our understanding of politics can be enhanced by complementing the usual concerns with political structure and process with an attention to political culture.

Students of politics in rural India are well aware that competitions are generated along two main lines of cleavage. The cleavage between castes and between castes and tribes defines the vertical axis of politics, and is reflected in competitions between ranked groups over the control of land, water, women, office, and other material resources, all of which have a bearing on the less tangible resource of status. The cleavage between big men defines the horizontal axis of politics, and is reflected in factional competitions between leaders, teamed with supporters from various castes and tribes, over the same kinds of material resources, plus recognition as the biggest of big men. Given that the material interests at stake in caste and factional competitions are much the same, discussions of politics in rural India have focused in the main on processual differences – say, in

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mobilizing support – between competitions structured around ascriptive, corporate teams like castes and voluntary, non-corporate teams like factions. Yet the local significance of caste and factional competitions – like the less often studied competitions between family members or between villagers and outsiders to a village – is in part independent of their structure and process and rests instead on the system of meaning in which they are embedded, something even the most astute observers of politics in rural India ignore or treat as ‘a given’ that does not require separate analysis (cf. Bailey 1960; Nicholas 1968; Robinson 1975).

I will illustrate this point, and thereby preview the material presented. Bengalis refer to politics as *sason* or rule, and then distinguish between two forms of rule: village politics (*gramer kaj*) and government politics (*sorkari kaj*). The distinctive contrast between these two forms of rule does not lie in the organization of political teams, the personnel who participate, or even the manner and means by which competition is waged, though there are differences in these regards. It lies instead in the broadly defined goal of political acts. That is, both village politics and government politics are identified behaviorally with rivalries over rank, and those rivalries are structured in much the same way; but in each form of rule are rivalries pursued with a different goal and in relation to a different normative framework. The many family, caste and factional competitions that instance village politics aim to protect and maintain the system of ranked inequalities described in chapters 2 and 3, a system considered divinely given, inherent in the nature of the universe, and thus beyond the agency of human change. This goal is defined in relation to the religious framework of Hinduism. It is expressed locally in equating politics with the administration of *dharma*. In the context of government politics, by contrast, rivalries aim to level, if not completely eliminate, the system of inequalities supported by considerations of *dharma*, and to substitute in its stead a polity, society and view of the cosmos ordered on the premise of equality. This goal is defined in relation to the Indian constitution and legal system, which also establish politics and religion as formally separate domains in a secular India. It is expressed locally in equating government politics with progress, a future better than the past.

Village politics and government politics are discussed in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. In each chapter the explanatory effort is to clarify why the many and varied competitions which occur in Torkotala are not an infrequent or unanticipated feature of life in rural West Bengal, by identifying the social processes which generate them. The effort also is to provide a cultural account of politics, detailing how village politics and government politics are both enactments of local morality. These related explanatory goals require complementing the now orthodox view of politics as a system of instrumental action – who gets what, when and how,

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in Harold Lasswell's paradigm – with an increased, more actor-oriented attention to politics as a system of meaning. What are the shared understandings of reality that inform political activity? What are the prizes, the goals, the valued ends towards which political activity is aimed? What are the qualities deemed to merit the political prize? Are these shared understandings, prizes and qualities peculiar to the domain of politics, or are they related to those which inform other social activity?

It is a commonplace that the ethnography generated during field work is colored by the questions used to elicit the information and the analytic perspective that both frames the questions and interprets the responses. In this light, to raise the above questions is to do more than fill an ethnographic gap. It is also to redirect the manner in which we approach the subject which is politics by adding to the usual questions about structure and process an attention to political culture that is lacking in accounts of politics in rural India, as in even the benchmark political studies of Evans-Pritchard, Gluckman, Fallers and Barth. This limitation of past political anthropology has not gone unnoticed (Winckler 1970: 334; Nicholas 1973: 64–7), and programmatic calls for a reorientation have not been entirely unheeded (e.g. Moore and Myerhoff 1975; Cohen 1976). But there is yet no consensus about how questions of structure, process and meaning can be integrated within a single framework.

In examining politics in a West Bengal village, this study adopts what Garfinkel (1967), following Mannheim (1952), has termed 'a documentary method of analysis,' or what can be identified in more familiar descriptive terms as the analysis of critical acts as social and cultural paradigms. The documentary method is similar to Gluckman's extended case method and van Velsen's (1967: 129–49) situational analysis in its detailed study of actual events within a broadly defined structural context. Yet it differs from both in the use to which case materials are put. For whereas case studies in the hands of British structuralists have been used mostly to detail patterns of choice and strategic action within the constraints of a given social system, the documentary method is intended to highlight politics as two-dimensional – as singular instrumental acts and as an embodiment or paradigmatic example of an underlying pattern of meaning that informs a number of different, ostensibly unrelated acts occurring at discontinuous points in time. Politics, in other words, is viewed instrumentally and symbolically.

Culture was defined earlier as a system of meaning. Political culture is that sub-set of concepts and ideas, premises and understandings that define the context of meaning in which political acts occur, are perceived and are interpreted. In attending to the symbolic nature of instrumental political acts, the documentary method aims to identify in what sense a particular competition embodies a pattern of meaning common to a variety of