

॥ नामूलं लिख्यते किञ्चित् ॥

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Origin of Caste System and Mohyal Brāhmaṇas

R.T. Mohan



aste system is almost as old as Hindu religion. Its very edifice is based on caste-structure. During the last couple of centuries 'subtle minds' and 'able pens' have endeavoured to unravel the mysteries of caste. But in spite of their undoubted scholarship the overall perception about the origin of caste structure, as we find it today, is a puzzling muddle.

In English language, the omnibus word 'caste'¹ is used to represent *Gotra*, *Varna*, *Jāti*, *Birādari* (a bunch of several *jātis*), *Kula*, or *Vamśa* – and much else – in respect of the stratification in Hindu society. This has caused considerable confusion in explaining caste-related issues. Since most of the scholarly discourse is carried out in English language, the Indian intellectuals, who have a tendency to expound their own thesis also in the backdrop of earlier theories by western researchers, tend to use the same idiom. Perplexed by the confounding views of the great, they often fail to recognise things simple and untwined, which should be easier for them to spot.

Cāturvarṇya Society

From ancient times Hindu society had four classes called *varṇas*: Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra.² In *Bhagavadgītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa himself explains to Arjuna the *dharma* (duties) of each *varṇa*.³ As a Kṣatriya, fighting to win was Arjuna's *dharma*. After the prevalence of Buddhism and Jainism, Hindus probably needed a written code for their guidance. Manu codified the 'traditional' laws

of Hinduism in his *Manusmṛti* (c. 200 BCE to 200 CE). Among other guidelines, the *Smṛti* confirms the division of society into 'four *varṇas* divinely ordained' and asserts "there is no fifth *varṇa*".⁴ The duties of each *varṇa* have been re-stated – as also the advisability of marrying within one's own *varṇa*. Thus a Brāhmaṇa could choose a spouse from the whole of his (Brāhmaṇa) *varṇa*, "who is neither a *sapinda* on the mother's side, nor belongs to the same family on father's side (same *gotra*)."⁵ There was no mention of any sub-divisions to restrict one's choice of marriage to a small fraternity (which is the case at present).

This division of society into four classes i.e. *varṇas* continued throughout the first millennium of the Common Era. It is confirmed by other Indian sources, such as Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (fourth century CE). In the beginning (page 10) of his compendium, Kauṭilya enumerates the duties of each *varṇa* as 'determined' in the *Vedas*.⁵ Example: Vaiśya's duties – study, performance of sacrifices, charity, agriculture, cattle breeding and trade. Perceptive foreign travellers visiting India did not fail to notice this caste-hierarchy. Hiuen Tsang (602-664), an eminent Chinese traveller who came to India during the first half of the seventh century, has thus described the castes in India during that time. "There are four orders of the heredity caste distinctions. The first is that of the Brāhmaṇas or "purely living"; they keep their principles and live continently, strictly observing their ceremonial purity. The second order is that of the Kshatriyas, the race of kings ... The third order is that of the Vaiśyas or class of traders ... The fourth order is that of Śūdras ... These four castes form classes of various degrees of ceremonial purity. The members

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of a caste marry within the caste ...¹⁶

Ibn Khordadbeh (820-912) who came to India during the ninth century counts the castes as seven – like Magesthenese, a Greek envoy to the court of Chandragupta Maurya (fourth century BCE). Khurdaba includes the outcast tribes like *Cāṇḍāla* and Wandering Tribes in his list. But most significant and knowledgeable is the record left by Abu Rehan (973-1048), commonly known as Al-Bīrūī. He came to India during the times of Mohammad Ghaznavi (early eleventh century) and wrote his book '*Kitab ta'rikh al-Hind*' about the sciences and customs of the Hindus. He states: 'The Hindus call their castes *varṇas* or colours and from the genealogical point of view they call them *Jātaḥ* (*Jāti*). They are four from the beginning. The highest are the Brāhmaṇas, next come Kshatriyas. Then follow the Vaiśyas and the Śūdras. Between the two latter classes there is not very much distance...¹⁷ It is significant that Bhimadeva Shahi and Jayapala of the ruling dynasties of that period were identified, by a knowledgeable scholar like Al-Bīrūī, simply as Brāhmaṇas – i.e. by their *varṇa* only and not any caste.⁸

From this it should be clear that up to the time when Islam first intruded in north-west India (early eleventh century) the traditional Cāturvarṇya, or the four-fold classification of Hindu society, was still in vogue.

In India the law of matrimony centres round the principal of exogamy. Marriage within one's own patriarchal clan (*sagotra*) is a strict taboo for the Hindus which custom is not violated even today. But how to keep a tag on consanguineous relationships over a period of centuries, and even millennia? Indo-Aryans have left a unique system to preserve the memory of descent, not to be witnessed anywhere else in the world. In Vedic times, a person was identified by his *pravara*, *gotra*, *Veda* and *Veda-śākhā* (*stotra*) suffixed to his name. *Pravara Ṛṣi* was the original progenitor from whom the family was descended. *Gotra Ṛṣi* was the *pravara* himself, or a prominent descendant could start a new sub-branch (*gotra*) with his own name. With the passage of time, there could be several *gotras* (all consanguineous) under the *pravara* patriarch. Further, since Vedas were learned only by recital, each Brāhmaṇa family had been assigned a specific *śākhā* of a particular Veda for study. These four attributes were

associated with the name of each individual of that family, just as caste is suffixed in the present times. At every Vedic ceremony, the *Yajamāna* or sacrificer had to recite his *gotra* and *pravara* at the beginning of the ceremony and in this way the memory of the Vedic ancestors from whom the reciter was descended was kept alive from day to day and generation to generation.⁹ In this way, a person knew which families formed his own patriarchal stock, to be eschewed for selection of a spouse (exogamy).

In the marriage ceremony of Hindus, which is still performed according to Vedic rites (*Vivāha-paddhati*), there is a section called *gotrācāra*: stating the *gotra*. Here the groom is required to identify himself by declaring that he is so and so (the groom's name), of this *pravara/gotra*, great grandson of so and so, grandson of so and so, son of so and so ... Likewise the bride. The original text requires it to be repeated thrice.¹⁰ However, in the simplified rituals of the modern times the groom declares his identity, with *gotra*, only once but it is never skipped. This is how families still remember their *gotra*.

Varṇasamkara Castes

As stated above, marital relations had to be outside one's *gotra* (exogamy) but within one's *varṇa* (endogamy). *varṇasamkara* (cross-*varṇa*) marriages were discouraged by degrading the profession of such progeny. Sons begotten by the first three *varṇas* on wives of the next lower *varṇas* were tolerated and could aspire for the profession of their respective fathers. But in any other permutation, the off-springs of a mixed marriage were nominated a new caste with specially assigned (menial) duties. Examples: The son of a Brāhmaṇa from a Vaiśya mother became *Ambaṣṭha*: he was to devote himself to the art of healing. The son of a Brāhmaṇa from a Shudra mother was *Niṣāda*, whose occupation would be killing fresh fish. Son of a Kshatriya from a Brāhmaṇa mother would be *Sūta*, who would attend to the management of horses and chariots. The son of a Vaiśya from a Kshatriya woman would be *Vaidehaka*, assigned to the service of women. Then there were the cross-breeds of the *varṇasamkaras*. For example the son of *Niṣāda* upon *Vaidehaka* woman would be *Karvāra* ... and so on. This created many castes different from the original four *varṇas*.

Modern researchers postulated that

thousands of castes in the Hindu society today are the result of proliferation of these mind-boggling permutations of mating with, and by, these *varṇasamkaras*. This theory held the field for quite some time but it stands completely discredited and we need not go into it. Suffice to say that a *varṇasamkara* stood expelled from the *varṇa* of his father, as also of his mother. On the other hand, each of the thousands of castes today definitely belongs to some *varṇa*. And as we shall explain later, castes of the same *varṇa* bunched together to form inter-marriage endogamous fraternities (*birādarīs*): no *birādari* has, say, Brāhmaṇa as also Kshatriya castes in it.

There has been lamentable muddle in all scholarly discussion on the subject for signal failure to notice various important developments that “evolved” in the Indian social order during certain stages over the millennia. For example, the Hindu society introduced new ramifications in Brāhmaṇism (or Hinduism, as it may be called today) when it felt threatened by the preponderance of Buddhism. Similarly it recalcitrated its *varṇa-vyavasthā* when it felt threatened by large scale forced conversions by Islam – without ever changing the basic structure of its divinely ordained *cāturvarṇya*, which is the anchor of Hinduism. Because of the context, we shall here highlight only the latter.

Caste Proliferation

By the time the Afghan armies seriously threatened Delhi, towards the end of the twelfth century, the Indians had inter-acted with the new religion of Islam for about five centuries (700-1200 CE). Indians had performed the feat (rare for those times) of blocking Muslim arms which were pushing towards India by way of southern Afghanistan – after having completely subjugated Iran.¹¹ The Arabs had been ruling over Sindh during this long period and the Ghaznavids in Punjab for two centuries, without being allowed to break through the cordon of Indian states around them. So when overwhelmed towards the end of the twelfth century, the Hindus set up “defensive ramparts in order to present a solid front to an aggressive and alien culture and religion.” This is when the traditional four *varṇas* imploded into numerous castes.

'The complete disintegration of the nation

into numerous and distinct profession-castes was subsequent to the Moslem conquest of India and the national death of the Hindus'.¹² Distinct profession-castes arose after the Muslim conquest. All the law books speak of four castes'.¹³ C.V. Vaidya (1861-1938) has also confirmed the same position by extensive study of the land grant documents.¹⁴ Several other historians too confirm this position.¹⁵ It is only 'by the end of the period under survey (1030-1194 AD) we find that all the Brāhmaṇas do not belong to one unit'.¹⁶

At that stage (end of twelfth century) (i) the *varṇas* disintegrated into numerous *jātis* or castes – each having a distinct *gotra*; groups of these castes (all of the same *varṇa*) bunched together to form caste fraternities (*birādarīs*) for marriage within their own (limited) group (endogamy) but outside their own caste/*gotra* (exogamy); and (iii) each person started identifying himself by suffixing his caste to his name.

This knowledge about implosion of *varṇas* into numerous castes did not have a wide circulation among historians. Scholars continued to be (mis)led by the earlier theories of 'Indo-Europeanists'. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) came nearest to the fact but failed to pin point its timing. After analysing the theories of Senart, Nesfield, Risely and Dr. Kelkar, he gave his own opinion: “For the people of India the law of exogamy is a positive injunction even today... The various Gotras of India are and have been exogamous ... none dare infringe it ... in the final analysis creation of Castes, so far India is concerned, means the superposition of endogamy on exogamy.” His observations were very perceptive but he just missed *when* the endogamous *birādarīs* were “superposed” on exogamous *gotra*.¹⁷ This happened after the Muslim conquest of India. Another significant observation by him needs to be mentioned. “There are occupational, religious etc., castes it is true, but by no means it is an explanation of the origin of Caste.”

A Case Study : The Mohyals

These fully substantiated facts about the implosion of the *varṇas* into castes, and the tradition of suffixing castes to names as marker of one's identity, are still not widely known even to the pandits and the historians. We are therefore carrying out a case study about one community – the Mohyāls – to illustrate these facts from their history.

The Mohyāls are a branch of Sārasvata Brāhmaṇas of north-west India. They are what the historians term *Brahma-Kṣatras* – Brāhmaṇas who had taken up the profession of Kshatriyas. At present they are an inter-marriage fraternity (*birādari*) of seven castes: Bali, Bhimwal, Chhibber, Datt, Lau, Mohan and Vaid. They claim 'direct' descent from their *Pravara* Ṛṣis: Parāśara, Kośala, Bhṛgu, Bhardvāja, Vasiṣṭha and Kaśyapa, who were their *pravara* as also *gotra* Ṛṣis. They belong to *Yajurveda* and its Mādhyāndina Shākhā. Mohyāls are very conscious about their history and heredity. Till recent times, their castes had bards (*bhāts*) singing *kavits* and eulogising the valorous deeds of their ancestors. This oral and recorded corpus of their history helps in studying their past.

Mohyāls claim the ruling dynasties of Chach/Dahar (Sindh); Samantadeva/Bhimadeva (Afghanistan); and Jayapala/ Trilochanapala (Afghanistan/Punjab) among their ancestors.¹⁸ These sovereigns ruled variously during the period 632 to 1026 CE (i.e. before appropriation of rule over Punjab by Mahmud Ghaznavi). *Chach Nama* and *Kitab ta'rikh al-Hind* (of Al-Bīrūī) specifically identify these sovereigns as Brāhmaṇas.¹⁹ They were not suffixing any castes to their names since it was not the tradition, till then. Footprints of Mohyāls are traceable in history during the later (Muslim or Medieval) period also and how are they identified there?

In 1527 CE, during the rule of Babar, Rai Pun Dewan, a chieftain of Datt caste of Mohyal Brāhmaṇas, attacked and killed Rai Meen (a local Rajput ruler) and taking control of the Pathankot territory founded his capital at Paniad (near Gurdaspur in Punjab). Provoked by this daring victory, Babar incited the governor at Lahore to attack Paniad. The governor was nursing his own grouse against Datts as he had developed a liking for a Hindu girl of Marwaha caste but she had sought the protection of Datts against his devilish designs. Expectedly there were dire threats but it was a matter of honour for Rai Pun Datt to provide protection to the damsel who had sought shelter. Datt defenders managed to repulse repeated attacks against Paniad. Ultimately due to the treachery of a cook, the whole Datt clan was ambushed and slaughtered, while they were outside the fort for a ceremony. Only two minor boys named

Shah Sarup and Dholan escaped from the doom as they were then visiting their maternal grand-sires at Sambha.²⁰

*Jang Nama Mohan*²¹ is a bardic poem about the history of the Mohan caste of Mohyāl Brāhmaṇas. They were masters of a large tract of land around Mamdot (now in Ferozepur district) during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Mohammad Shah (1719-1748 CE). The Mughal Empire was in decline. The Marathas had spread network of their activities from Gujrat to Bengal and up to the river Ravi in Punjab. The Sikhs were also consolidating their position in Punjab. But the most catastrophic event during the rule of Mohammad Shah was the invasion by Nadir Shah (1698-1747) of Iran, who decamped with “the accumulated wealth of 348 years” of Muslim rule (after the sack of Delhi by Timur). Political conditions were precarious, particularly in Punjab. Lakhpat Rai was the Wazir (Prime Minister) and his brother Jaspat Rai was Dewan of Yahya Khan, the Mughal governor of Punjab at Lahore. Kaura Mal was the trusted Dewan of Nawaz Khan, the governor at Multan.²² This is being mentioned to highlight that the Hindu chiefs were holding high positions in Punjab during that period and were active players in the administration.

Mohammad Shah entrusted one Sadhu Ram Mohan, a grandee in his court, with some military assignment in Punjab, which he carried out successfully (*Mughal aur Pathan jeet ekaranaaye salaam*). During his absence, Jai Ram Mohan, a very handsome grandson of Sadhu Ram was seized, forcibly converted to Islam and married to a royal princess. Mohyāls, the Brāhmaṇa warriors, are known for their uprightness and loyalty. Professional loyalty was a matter of pride for them and there is no mention of any treachery on their part, whether in the service of the Muslims, the Sikhs or the British. Professional loyalty was a matter of pride for them. But personal faith (their religion) was a matter of honour and self-esteem. There was a redline (*Lakṣmaṇa Rekḥā*) between the two. After successfully completing his assignment in Punjab, Sadhu Ram came to Mamdot and related the development to his people. The Mohan clan of Mamdot challenged their sovereign to reclaim their 'son', refused any negotiations on the issue and the whole claim was almost annihilated on the battlefield, in this unequal fight. According to

Seegadh Pothi, the original history book on which this account of the *Jang Nama* is based, 2088 veteran Mohan men and women perished in this carnage. The *Pothi* gives names of 72 men of distinction who died fighting in this horrific war.

Karyala is a village in Tehsil Pind Dadan Khan, District Jhelum (now in Pakistan). One Prag Das, of the Chhibber caste of Mohyāl Brāhmaṇas of Karyala, came in contact with Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539). He had a long life and remained in close association with the later Gurus. *Suraj Parkash*, Chapter III, eulogises the chivalry and valour of Prag Das. Baba Praga sired a family several members of which served the Sikh Gurus and sacrificed their lives at their command. They remained Dewans under the Gurus. After his ascension when Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru, travelled in East India (1656-1664), Gaval Das, son of Chhote Mal Chhibber, Chaupat Rai son of Pera Chhibber and Sangat son of Bina Uppal had accompanied him. (*Bhat Vahi Dakhini*). In July 1675, when Guru Tagh Bahadur was taken into custody at Malikpur Ranghran, sent to Sirhind and later onwards to Delhi, Dewan Mati Das and Sati Das, sons of Hira Nand Chhibber were also arrested with him. (*Bhat Vahi Multani Sindhi*). The unparalleled martyrdom of Mati Das and Sati Das has remained almost “unsung and uncelebrated martyrdom in history”. It is recorded that when Guru Gobind Singh succeeded to the *guruship*, his first act was to ask for the scions of the Chhibber clan for the posts of dewan in place of Mati Das and Sati Das: *Tab Satgur Gaddibiraji, Kiya Manorath purankaje, Puchho Chhibber bipar (Brahmin) haijoi, Lia Devanimungharsoi*. Saheb Chand and Dharam Chand (later baptised as Singhs), both nephews of Bhai Mati Das Chhibber were present and were appointed Dewans. Mukand Rai, son of the martyred Mati Das and Kirpa Ram Datt (Mohyal Brahman of Mattan, Kashmir) laid down their lives during the battle at Chamkor (1705 CE). Saheb Chand/Singh was killed in a battle near river Beas on behalf of Guru Gobind Singh. (*Jit Bhaitahi Khalsaki, aur Saheb Chand ki loth uthai*). The body of Saheb Chand was cremated by the Guru with his own hands on the bank of river Beas.

From the foregoing account it will be observed that while ancestors of Mohyāls were identified by their (Brāhmaṇa) *varṇa* during the first millennium, their castes (Datt, Mohan, Chhibber)

are prominently mentioned with their names in historical accounts during the Muslim rule in India.

Summary

From ancient times the Vedic Dharma had four main divisions, called Brāhmaṇa, Kṣhatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra. Their duties, or professions, had been defined. This social order remained intact despite foreign aggressions and internal religious upheavals – till the appearance of Islam on the world scene. For more than five hundred years (c. 643 to 1192 CE) Hindus held back the Islamic arms from reaching the heart land of India. Finally when overwhelmed during the end of the twelfth century, they made several adjustments in their traditional social order. At this stage: (a) each *varṇa* disintegrated into numerous castes, or *jātis*; (b) groups of castes, of the same *varṇa*, bunched together to form inter-marriage fraternities or *birādaris*; (c) the castes included in a certain *birādari* had distinctly different *gotras*; (d) a person had to marry outside his own caste (*gotra*) according to the ancient tradition, but limit his choice to one of the other castes within his newly formed fraternity (*birādari*) and (e) a new tradition developed – each person was proclaiming his identity prominently by suffixing caste to his name. These adjustments in the social order did not violate any of the scriptural injunctions and continue till the present times.

Notes and References:

1. This was taken from the Portuguese 'casta'.
2. 'Puruṣa Sūkta' in the tenth Maṇḍala of the *Rgveda*.
3. Bhagavadgītā, XVIII, 42-45.
4. *Manusmṛti*, Ch. I, 31 and 87-91; III, 5 and X, 4.
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7. *Alberuni's India*, Translation Edward C. Sachau, Vol. I, Chapter IX 'On the Castes called 'Colours' (varṇa) and the Classes Below Them', pp.99-104.
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13. A. Kumar Mazumdar, *Early Hindu India: A Dynastic Study*, Vol. III (Dacca, 1917), p. 820.

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15. Vasudeva Upadhyay, *The Socio-Religious Conditions of North India (700-1200 AD)* (Varanasi, 1964); Vibhuti Bhushan Mishra, *The Gurjara-Pratiharas and Their Times* (1966); Mahendra Pratap Singh, *Life In Ancient India (c. AD 800-1200)*.
16. Bhakat Prasad Mazumdar, *Socio-Economic History of Northern India (1030-1194)*, (Calcutta, 1960), p.93.
17. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes In India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, Paper read at the Columbia University, New York in May 1916; *Dr. Baba Saheb Abedkar : Writings and Speeches*, Vol. I. Bombay Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979, pp. 3-22.
18. C.V. Vaidya, *History of Mediaeval Hindu India*, Vol. III, p. 21: "Mohyals who are a sub-sect of Sārasvata Brāhmaṇas... claim with justice and propriety that Jaipala and Anandpal were Mohyal Brahmans." Also, H.A. Rose, *A glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (Census Reports 1883 and 1892) p. 132: "It is not impossible that Brahman dynasty of Kabul sprang from a class of secular Brahmans from which Mohyāls are descended."
19. Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg, English translation of *The Chach Nama, An Ancient History of Sindh* (Karachi, 1900), pp. 16, 21, 121, 131 and 135. *Alberuni's India*, Translation Edward C. Sachau, Vol. II, p.13.
20. Raizada Harichand Vaid, *Gulshane Mohyali* (Lahore, 1923), Part II, pp.187-190.
21. Chaudhry Gauri Shankar Datt 'Sagar', *Mohyāl History*, (Mohyāl Mitter Press, Lahore), Part V, *Jang Nama Mohanan*, pp.121-137.
22. This account about the conditions in Punjab is based on Mohammad Latif, *History of the Punjab*, pp.212-219 and a few other standard works.

