Caste, Kinship, Tribe and Nation

Imtiaz Ahmad


Both these books are significant to students of Indian social structure. They advance our understanding of Indian social life, and show us the way toward a more comprehensive analysis of complex Indian social institutions and the changes taking place in them. Adrian Mayer deals with caste relations in a multi-caste village and its region in the former princely state of Dewas Senior, now included in the central Indian State of Madhya Pradesh. Bailey is concerned with the analysis of political activity of the Konds in the three different contexts of tribe, caste, and nation.

A major theme of Mayer’s book is the difference between what he calls ‘caste’ and ‘sub-caste’. The former is defined as a larger reference category composed of sub-castes, rather than a group in its own right. The sub-caste is a group of actual or potential kin whose members take care to keep them separate from all other similar groups. Caste membership is important for relations with other castes, and sub-caste membership for activities within the caste. Thus, there are two different groups of Weavers, viz., Malwi Weavers and Gujrali Weavers in the village here called Ramkheri. Members of both these groups are treated simply as Weavers by others i.e. Non-Weavers, but they keep themselves separate and maintain marriage and other intimate ties with entirely different sub-caste members in neighbouring villages.

This distinction between caste and sub-caste seems to have been over-emphasized by Mayer. In any linguistic region in India there are a number of immigrant castes who speak a different language from the one which is locally dominant. The speakers of the same language, whatever their sub-caste, possess certain common cultural forms, and when, in the same linguistic region there are sub-castes with different languages or belonging to different linguistic areas, each becomes conscious of the cultural form which distinguishes it from others and tries to maintain it by observing sub-caste restrictions. The groups of Weavers in Ramkheri keep themselves separate and maintain endogamous relations with different sub-caste fellows in other villages, not just because they belong to two sub-castes, as Dr. Mayer assumes, but because they belong to two different linguistic regions possessing two different cultural forms. Sub-castes belonging to the same region, and otherwise equal in status, do not emphasize this difference. They generally deal with a person in terms of the larger reference, category.

Three Levels of Membership

Mayer discerns three levels of membership in a caste. The lowest is that, of an effective sub-caste population, called the kindred of cooperation, with whom a villager has close agnatic and affinal ties. Around it is the group called the kindred of recognition within which marriages are made and/or kin links can be traced through mutual kin. Beyond these two kindreds are people who are recognized as members of a sub-caste which is endogamous, named and separate from other sub-castes. The overlapping network of kin ties varying from person to person and even more among the groups of a village — constitute a region. This makes the region, a fluid and rather unsatisfactory structural concept. Nevertheless, it is an important concept, since, apart from its socio-economic aspects, the villagers generally have definite notions of their regional identity as contrasted with people of other regions. In most of the studies of caste relations in Indian villages single village has so far been the main focus of research.

The study is remarkable in that it focusses on the region. It is only by a number of similar studies that we can really understand the complexity of the caste structure and its pivotal position in determining the actions and social relations of villagers.

Since the region appears amorphous, the village emerges as a fairly autonomous entity. Thus, the people of one village need not observe the same rules of inter-group dining as those of a neighbouring village. Similarly, a boycott by carpenters in one village may be ignored by their sub-caste fellows in a nearby village.

Rajputs are the dominant caste in Ramkheri. Allied to them, and ranking in the same division of the local hierarchy are seven other castes following the warrior tradition of meat-eating and drinking liquor. Parallel in rank, but separate from this division, is another, comprising six castes which follow the vegetarian tradition. The vegetarians are ascendant because basing their superiority on the principles of non-violence, they consider vegetarianism as the wave of the future, and look forward to national policies which will eventually ban all animal slaughter and so bear out their superiority. This shows that, though caste standards are changing, caste is still pivotal in the life of the villagers. This revelation will undoubtedly disappoint those who believe that a new casteless social order is emerging in Indian village.

Choice in Political Relations.

Bailey deals with the Kond Village, here called Baderi, in the eastern Kondomals in Orissa. Here the authors main concern is with the conflicts which arise when tribal system meets the caste system, and the role of administration and politics in initiating social change. The problem is death with from the point of view of politics.

The central argument is that in the political field there are main choices open to a person. These choices lie not within one system of political relations but also between systems. Thus for example, in Kondomals there are at least three different political systems, namely:
the tribal system, the caste system, and the system of administration and representative democracy. All these systems have the same 'aim content' and every Kond has a role in all of them. But as he cannot operate in all of them at once, he has to choose between them.

The argument is presented with the help of case histories supported by statistical data. The analysis moves by stages from the simple to the complex. It begins with a discussion of the competition for power and control over resources within the tribal system and the way men combine with one another so as to compete more effectively. This analysis shows that there are no contradictions within the system so presented.

Next, it moves to political relations of a different type than those which characterize the tribal system. These are the relationships between the Konds and the Pans. Here too there is no contradiction.

In the third stage the analysis moves to the political relationships between the Oriyas and the Konds. Here we are told that the Oriya system of political relationships is not only different from the tribal system, but is contradictory. This contradiction is reflected at the level of conflict between groups in which the Konds tried to extrude the Oriyas, or the Oriyas attempt to bring the Kond in the Oriya political structure.

Where Tribe and Caste Merge

Finally, the analysis shifts to the wider political arena of nation. Today the political allegiances are not within the local system only but in the wider political arena. As a result, the Konds no longer try to become the headman of the mantha (the administrative division in which Baden lies) as they did formerly, but try to be politically active in the Kond caste, by working in their organization called the Kui Samaj, to get into the inner ring of this organization, to be employed as social worker by the Congress or one of the other political parties and eventually to reach the top by becoming a Member of the Legislative Assembly. This trend of political change suggests that, politically at least, the distinction between 'tribe' and 'caste' is ceasing to be a useful one. In the modern caste — the group which is politically active to the width of the linguistic region both the tribe and the traditional caste are being merged.

Moreover, more recently, through the paternalistic policies of the Administration, and latter through the Kond dominance in numbers in the representative democracy, the balance of power is shifting in favour of the Konds. The Konds are challenging the dominant caste. This does not mean the decay of the caste system. It might be a means by which the system is adjusted to meet economic realities. In such a situation the positions in the structure change but the structure does not change. But it might also be a structural change an arresting of the move back to equilibrium, at the end of which there emerges not one but several castes, all of which have some, but not a complete claim to dominance. Such a system is still called caste and it is this type of system which is emerging in most villages in the present transitional Indian society. But this type of society is different from the classical pattern of dominant and dependent caste. In this type of society territorial cleavages are replaced by cleavages between castes.

Bailey does not claim to provide us with any principles of political change. 'The only principle I have to offer' he writes, 'is the heuristic one — to ask continually who profited and through what means. I would, however, claim the book brings into focus the wider problem of nationhood and gives us a fairly comprehensive picture of changing social order in India today. It is expected that it will serve as a useful model for similar studies in other parts of India.'