

Sanskritisation

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As both the processes of sanskritisation and westernisation are going on at the same time, there is a conflicting, or more correctly, a confusing situation.

On the one hand, there are the lower castes trying to take on the traditional values and customs of the upper castes, to raise their status. On the other hand, the upper castes are discarding some of these customs.

Westernisation may be characterised as a movement from the sacred to the secular. It is difficult to characterise Sanskritisation in a 'toe red-secular' of 'folk-urban frame of reference.

In any case, from the view point of culture content the more important aspect to be noted is that these processes are likely to result in having a common set of cultural elements in all of Hindu society.

At the same time, there is an element of "conflict" between westernisation and Sanskritisation. Most of the castes are faced with a dilemma of making a choice.

With increased industrialisation, greater communication, new occupations, greater education, it seems likely that westernisation will be the more dominant process.

THE form of 'Sanskritisation' was first used by Prof M N Srinivas in his book *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of India*. This book is a study of the Coorgs—a caste like group of people in India occupying the area called Coorg, located on the south west coast. The Coorgs are divided into two sections, one of which is "highly Brahminised in their customs and ritual" Srinivas says that these Coorgs "exemplify a tendency which has always been present in the caste system; a small group of people break off from a larger whole, of which they are a part. Sanskritise their customs and ritual and achieve a higher status than their parent body in the course of a few decades".

Sanskritisation is defined by Srinivas as follows:

"The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible and especially so in the middle regions of hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two to rise to higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it looks over as far as possible the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called Sanskritisation in this book."⁸

The word "Sanskritisation" is rather difficult to understand. The immediate reaction on seeing the word is that it must be related to "Sanskrit", the classical and sacred languages of the Hindus.

The Word Itself

The other word that could have been used is "Brahminisation" but Srinivas rejects this for the following reasons:

(1) Brahminisation is subsumed in the wider process of Sanskritisation:

(2) the customs and habits of Brahmins changed after they settled in India; and

(3) the agents of Sanskritisation were not, and are not always Brahmins.

Another factor involved is that the word "Brahminisation" evokes the connotation of Vedic traditions, but 'not all aspects of sanskritisation are Vedic.

At one of the conferences where the concept was discussed, the word 'Hinduisation' was suggested—but as it smacked of proselytization, it was not accepted. Further the word suggests that many of the lower castes are not Hindus which is not true. Also Hinduism includes many non-Sanskrit elements. Another suggestion was "imitation" but the process of Sanskritization involves more than mere imitation.

To the suggestion that "acculturation" be used, Srinivas gave the following reply:

"There was another suggestion made that we should discard a local term like Sanskritisation for acculturation. I think this should be rejected for the reason that acculturation takes a particular form in Hindu society and we want to characterize this particular form of acculturation..... Generalizations about acculturation all over the world are a bit too premature."

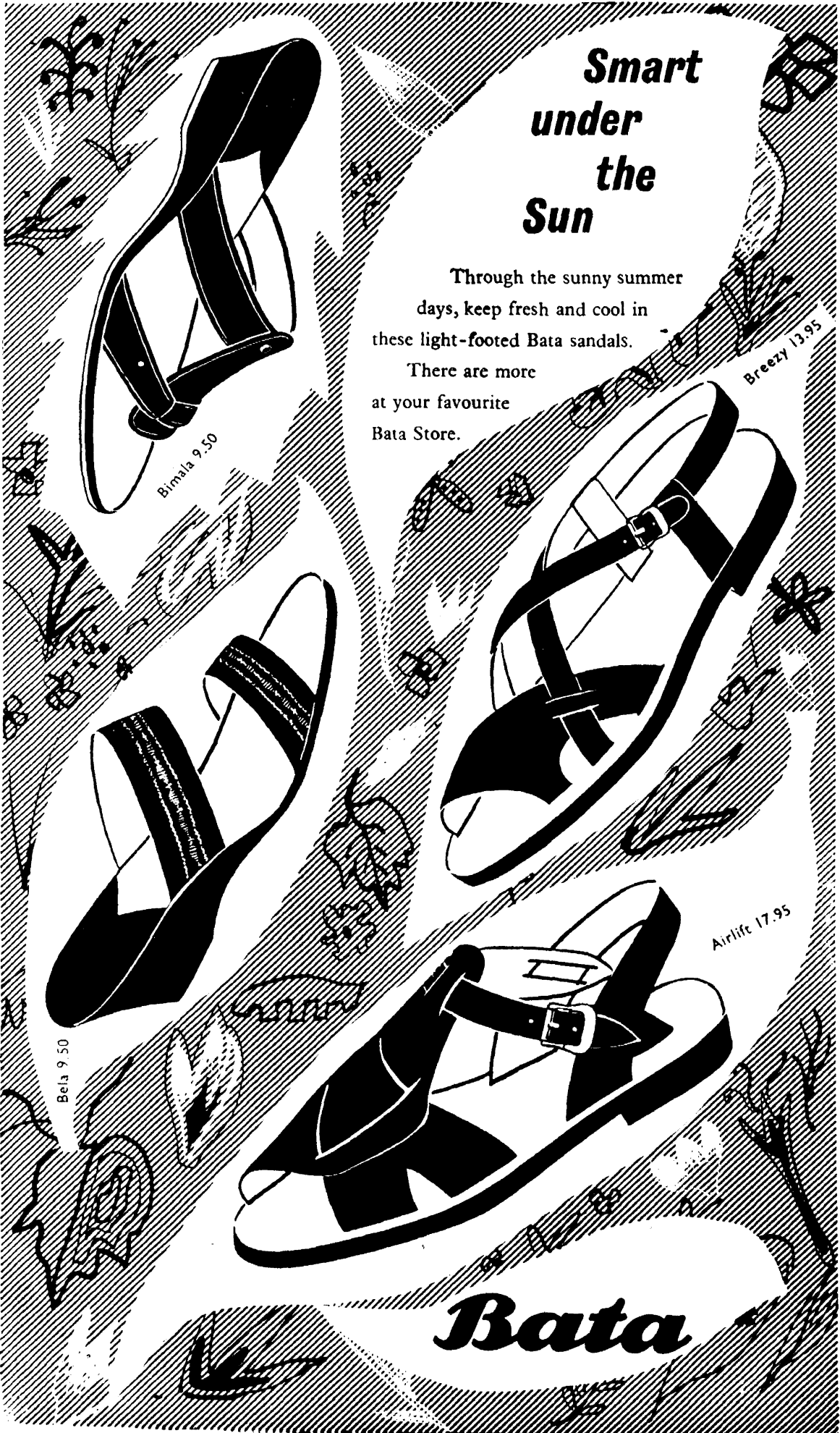
Redfield, who was at the conference, commented as follows:

"I entirely agree with the suggestion that the process of acculturation that is going on in India should be indicated by a special term because the process itself is special. In acculturation generally, a group takes over elements of culture not practised by that group. Sanskritisation is a process whereby elements of tradition more nearly universal and more reflectively cultivated are communicated to, and some often consciously assumed by a group whose local folk culture has long contributed and drawn from reflective culture. The process is taking place within a civilized community not only characterized by a high tradition but also by a more local and unreflective tradition. There are levels or stages of culture and the arrangements of the stages are affected and altered by the process of sanskritisation. This is quite different from the process which occurred when the red Indians met European traders who came into contact with them. Therefore in

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my view it is good we find a special term to express this process."⁶ Srinivas himself said the word was "ugly", but at the end of the discussion he felt that nothing that had been said had convinced him that he should change the word.

The Process

"The structural basis of Hindu society is caste and it is not possible to understand Sanskritisation without reference to the structural framework in which it occurs.

"Speaking generally the castes occupying the top positions in the hierarchy are more Sanskritised than the castes in the lower and middle ranges of the hierarchy and this has been responsible for the Sanskritisation of the lower castes as well as the outlying tribes. The lower castes seem to have always tried to take over the customs and ways of life of the higher castes. The theoretical existence of a ban on their adoption of Brahmanical customs and rites was not very effective and this is clear when we consider the fact that many non-Brahmanical castes practise many Brahmanical customs and rites"⁷

As this process was common to all the castes except the highest, it meant that the Brahmanical customs and way of life spread among the Hindus. However, the immediate group that was imitated by the lower castes was the locally dominant group. As the dominant caste began to take on more of the Brahmanical customs and rites, the latter slowly seeped down to the lower castes as well and, hence, to the entire society. Among the customs taken over are clothing, jewellery, cooking, vegetarianism, teetotalism and at times the changing of the name of the caste.

According to Srinivas, two legal fictions helped the process of Sanskritisation of the ritual aspects. The ban is restricted not to the ritual itself but to the recital of magic chants (mantras) from the Vedas. This was circumvented by the lower castes by using Sanskrit verses from the Post-Vedic period. This substitution in itself was the second legal fiction.

The non-Brahmins not only adopt the Brahmanical rites and customs, but also the institutions. Srinivas corroborates this by referring to marriage, position of women, and kinship. Among Hindus, there is

preference for virginity in brides, chastity in wives, and continence in widows. This is especially marked among the highest castes. The lower have not been very rigid in their sex code, but as the castes rise in the hierarchy, it becomes more and more Sanskritised and, in sex and marriage, the code of the Brahmins is taken over. Widow remarriage and divorce are restricted. Srinivas himself says, "Sanskritization results in harshness towards women."⁸ In the sphere of kinship, the patrilineal lineage is stressed among the Brahmins, hence the importance of the sons.

Sanskritisation also means the adoption of new ideas and values which have been expounded in Sanskrit literature. Such theological terms as *Karma* (predestination and rebirth), *dharma* (duty), *papa* (sin), *punya* (merit and deliverance), *maya* (illusory nature of the world), *samsara* (universal), and *moksha* (liberation) are used frequently. These were essentially related to Vedas and the discussion confined mostly to Brahmins.

Helps and Hinderances

What has been said so far may seem to suggest that the process of Sanskritisation goes on without hindrances. This is not true. The very fact that it takes decades and decades for a caste to raise its status is indicative of the slowness of the process and slowness is an indication of the opposition. "Once inside Sanskrit Hinduism, the local rites and beliefs undergo Sanskritisation rapidly in a thoroughgoing manner." In the recent past, the process of Sanskritisation seems to have been accelerated,

Among the factors that have helped the process along are the "legal fictions" that have been already mentioned. The second factor is western technology — railways, press, radio, internal combustion engine, and plane. Communication is easier and ideas spread more quickly because of it. Parliamentary democracy also contributed to it. Some of the values of the higher castes were written into the Constitution — such as prohibition and monogamy.

"It is possible that the very ban on the adoption of the Brahmanical way of life by the lower castes, had exactly the opposite effect. The forbidden fruit was the tastier one"

"The pantheistic bias in Hinduism also contributes to Sanskritisation of the deities and beliefs of the low castes and outlying communities. The doctrine that everything in the universe is animated by God; that all the various deities are only forms assumed by the same Brahma makes the process of absorption easier."¹⁰

"The stratification of the Hindu society into castes has in a sense helped Sanskritisation because in any hierarchical system, there is a tendency to imitate the customs, habits, manners of the top group."¹¹

The most important factor in the hindrance for the process is the resentment of other castes against any caste that tries to raise its status. Often political and economic pressures are put. At times even physical force is used to prevent the lower castes' taking on the customs and the rituals of higher castes. Cohn mentions the fact that *Thakurs* used political and economic pressure and also physical violence to keep the Chamars in place. In my own study of North Indian Village, one of the more educated Brahmins said, "If the lower castes attempted to disobey Brahmins they would ask them not to walk on their fields. If they do, we can manhandle them physically." As the houses of the lower castes were located in the midst of the fields of the Brahmins, the lower castes would not be able to move out of the houses at all. As the upper castes hold most of the land, are better educated, hence have the economic and the political power to subdue them . . ." A more effective barrier to the taking over of the customs and the rites of the higher castes by the lower castes, was the hostile attitude of the locally dominant caste or of the king of the region."¹²

Functions of Sanskritisation

A second factor that hinders the process of Sanskritisation is westernization—this is in view of the fact that there is a conflict between the Sanskrit and western values—the conflict between "the world view disclosed by the systematic application of scientific method to the various spheres of knowledge and the view of traditional religions."¹³ At present this conflict is implicit, rather than explicit as it is not fully realized.

It could be said that there are three major functions of the process.

In the first place, as the process was common to all castes except the highest, the Brahminical customs and the way of life spread among all the Hindus.

From this arises the second function, namely that because of the spread of one particular way, a common "culture" was developing throughout the whole Hindu society. "The presence of completely sanskritised worship of rivers, trees, and mountains in Hinduism, and then incorporation in vast mythology of Hinduism, makes easier the assimilation of the ritual beliefs of the lower castes and of communities remaining outside Hinduism."

A third function is to provide for social mobility within a rigid social structure. Too often the caste system and Hindu society are described as non-mobile. This does not provide a total description of the Hindu society. The reform movements, the revolts of the lower castes and Sanskritisation all indicate that the Hindu society is dynamic. Sanskritisation provides the means of vertical social mobility.

The concept of sanskritisation is one of the most widely discussed and used concepts in recent studies. However, I shall confine myself to citing four studies and indicating the findings on the subject,

Cohn studied a village in U P. He states "For the last thirty years the Chamars of Modhopur have struggled consciously to raise their status on another related front—that of caste hierarchy. At least two generations ago, in the vicinity of Modhopur, began to outlaw eating of beef and the carting of manure in what proved to be a futile attempt to gain greater respect for the caste."¹⁴

Such attempts to raise their caste status are not individual in character or effect. Nor are they necessarily legislated by large formal gatherings. Rather a leader or a group of leaders in the caste in one village feels that some traditional behaviour should be changed and the changes are talked over in the village. Relatives and others who are visiting hear about the proposed change and carry the news to their home villages. If a local group of Chamars decides to initiate the change, it decrees that any Chamar who fails to conform to the new pattern will be outcasted. Active propagandizing follows from

the initiating village or villages. Ultimately the initiating Chamars determine that they will no longer give daughters to or accept daughters-in-law from the Chamars who do not conform to the change.

"Consistent with efforts to raise their caste status to gain power, the Chamars of Modhopur in recent years also made conscious efforts to suppress their distinctive traditional religion, to Sanskritise their rituals still further and emulate the specific religious forms of the higher castes. Although they continue to propitiate the Goddess Bhagoti jointly of the whole hamlet and although they continue to worship the other deities, as do members of the higher castes, yet they have made many changes in the rest of their religious practice"¹⁵

Case Studies

Domestic ceremonies of the Chamars have been modelled increasingly upto leaders and devotees of the Siva Narayan sect. The sacrifice of a pig which began the Chamar wedding ceremony has now been given up and replaced by the cutting of a nutmeg?¹⁰

Dowry is beginning to replace bride price. A Brahmin conducts the wedding ceremony. Horoscopes are cast at birth ceremonies. Changes have been made in the death rituals. Pilgrimage is emphasized. "..... recent changes have moved Chamar religion directly toward the main stream of the great tradition of orthodox Hinduism."

Berremen studied a village in the Himalayan regions. He states "Increasing contact with Brahmins educated in traditional Hinduism has been sufficient to impel the whole society including all castes towards increasing acceptance of Sanskrit values and aspirations, or at least superficial adherence to these. Where new reference groups have been acquired, they have been largely those within the traditional Hindu culture with which the people have long had some acquaintance. Status improvement here as among the low castes of the plains is perceived as achievable through adoption of Sanskrit practices. That it occurs among all castes almost uniformly is due in part to the relative absence of differential beliefs and practices among castes in this area which in turn is largely attributed to lack of caste community isolation in these hills.

'Therefore, the picture is of the changing caste moving up in the Sanskrit caste status hierarchy, as the higher more advantaged castes move out of the hierarchy into a non-Sanskritic milieu. In Srikanda the picture is of the entire, Pahari community attempting to move up from the low status to higher status in terms of Sanskrit values while castes within that community retain their relative status positions..... It is however an assertion that the dominant trend is' towards society-wide movement upward in the traditional Sanskrit context."¹⁷

In Srikanda there is little evidence of any one caste making an organized effort to raise its status in the system. This does not mean that the low castes would not like to rise in status, but they see no way to do it. They feel that they are subject to the will of high castes who would never tolerate impingement upon their superior status.¹⁸

Cohn mentions in his study of the attempt by "Noniyas"^o to raise their status. Rowe^b made a study of this caste in the same village^c. According to him, there is not much of a process of sanskritisation. There are possibly two reasons for this. One may be due to the failure to raise the status through the process of Sanskritisation. The second reason may be that they feel that westernization (discussed later) is a better way of catching up with the upper castes. Rowe feels that there is a greater process of westernization than Sanskritisation. The reaction towards Sanskritisation is characterised by the following statement. "What is the use of calling oneself a Singh (the reference to changing of 'name to a higher caste) if you can't be a Singh?"

In my own study of a village in U. P. there was not too much evidence of Sanskritisation among the lower castes. There was some indication of Sanskritisation among the middle range caste groups, particularly in matters of food and to

^a A higher caste than Chamars studied by Cohn

^b Information based on personal discussion

^c Rowe W, Social & Economic Mobility in a low caste North India Community, Ph D thesis (Unpublished), Cornell University, 1960

some extent in rituals. The middle range caste groups seemed to be observing nil the rituals that the Brahmins observed, the difference was in the degree of elaboration.

In the village studied by me, it is possible to explain the lack of Sanskritisation by using another concept developed by Srinivas—"dominant caste."²⁰ According to this concept, each village has a dominant caste—dominance may be based on ritual "power" economic power, political power, or a combination of them. In the village studied, the dominance of the dominant caste—Brahmins—was too complete to allow any attempt by the lower caste to try to raise their status. Brahmins wielded power with regard to rituals. They were the land-holders and the lower castes were engaged by them labourers. Numerically, they were the largest. The village council was dominated by the Brahmins—only three out of thirteen being non-Brahmins. The lower castes were too much under subjugation to try to raise themselves.

Westernization

Reference has already been made to westernization. Western influence came to India through the British. There was an attempt by Indians to accept, adopt, or imitate the British customs and habits. "The form and pace of westernization in India varied from one region to another and from one section of the population to another. For instance, one group of people became westernized in their dress, diet, manner, speech, sports, and the gadgets they used, while another acquired western science, knowledge and literature while remaining relatively free from westernization in externals."²¹

The process of westernization was more relevant to the upper castes. Brahmins. Kshathryas and Vaish had a literary tradition which gave them an initial advantage in taking to western education. In most parts of the country Brahmins were the first to take to English. This resulted in increasing (a) the social distance between them and other castes and (h) brought them closer to the rulers which in turn enabled them to acquire political and economic advantages. As the Brahmins were at the top of social hierarchy, it was easy for them to do things without being subject to ridicule. Any attempt by the lower

castes to do the same would have been ridiculed.

Aspects Westernized

As stated earlier, not all aspects of "westernization" were accepted. This is in keeping with process of acculturation in which there is always selection and adaptation. Some of the changes which Srinivas mentions are changes in appearance and dress. Crop haircut became normal. The wearing of shirts, and suits became common. The change in dress led to change in certain ideas with particular reference to rituals connected with 'pure robes'" for eating. The diet changed. Onion, carrot, potato, radish, beet-root became part of the menu. Formerly they were forbidden. New occupations were taken. Medical profession (which involved touching the corpses, treating untouchables) became popular. An indirect effect was the spread of dowry. The demand for educated boys with good jobs brought in "dowry" in place of "bride price". Certainly many ideas of western origin were accepted. "The systematic application of scientific method" had already been mentioned. The legal and political system was accepted.

The process of westernization took place because:

1. British rule and the imposition of legal and political system
 2. Increased social value on education which was mostly in English and the functional necessity of studying English—to be able to secure jobs
 3. Increased communication and transport system
1. The desire of the upper castes to move nearer to the ruling class and also to increase the social distance with the lower castes

Present Situation

As both the processes of sanskritisation and Westernization are going on at the same time, it would be said that there is a conflicting, or more correctly, a confusing situation. Cohn refers to this condition in his article. On the one hand there are the lower castes trying to take on the traditional values and customs of the upper castes, to raise their status. On the other hand, the upper castes are discarding some of these customs.

Westernization may be characterised as a movement from the sacred to the secular. In the sacred society, the characteristics are folk and prescribed, particularistic, collective oriented, diffuse, quality-oriented (ascription! and affective. In the secular, the factors involved are principles, and normless, universalistic, ego-oriented, specific, performance-oriented (achievement), and affective-neutrality. It is difficult to characterise sanskritisation in a "sacred-secular of folk-urban" frame of reference.

Trends

Some trends have already been implicitly indicated. However, other aspects need to be made explicit. The fact that the lower castes are trying to "sanskritise" i.e. to adopt the traditions and customs of the Brahmins. The Brahmins, on the other hand, are becoming more westernized. The lower castes are faced with a dilemma. As members of the lower castes they have certain privileges which the government has accorded to them (free tuition, preference in selective jobs, scholarships, etc) so as to bring them in line with the rest of the society. The lower castes do want these privileges, but they also want to raise their status. It is a case of wanting to have the cake and eat it too.

Among middle range castes, westernization seems to be gaining rapidly. As indicated in Rowe's study, the attempt seems not to Sanskritise. This is possibly due to two reasons. The upper castes are westernizing and naturally if the immediately lower castes are going to imitate them, then naturally there will be westernizing/Secondly, caste names and rituals do not now account entirely for the status. Education, occupation, and wealth are beginning to be considered. Most occupations outside the caste hierarchy do have a high value, e.g., lawyer, teacher, doctor, government service, factory worker, etc.

In brief, the lower castes are still trying to give up the traditions and customs which gave them lower status and are trying to adopt customs and traditions of the upper castes. The upper castes are overlooking their rituals, customs, and traditions and taking to westernization. The middle range castes tend to imitate the upper castes, hence

undergoing "westernization." It is possible that the lower castes will, in the near future, take to westernization,

Implication for Culture Content

In both Sanskritisation and westernization, there is culture accumulation as well as culture depletion.

In Sanskritisation, the lower castes are giving up their own rituals, customs, folkways, and values. Hence, there is culture depletion. On the other hand, there is culture accumulation in view of the fact that they are taking over new values, traditions, and customs from the upper castes. In westernization the new elements which have come into being have been mentioned. The upper castes seem to be giving up the rituals and customs of the past. Hence there is both accumulation as well as depletion.

From the present trends, it would seem that the process of westernization is likely to become the more dominant process. In any case, from the viewpoint of culture content the more important aspect to be noted is that these processes are likely to result in having a common set of cultural elements in all of Hindu society. At present there is great diversity. Both sanskritisation and westernization are a trend towards decreasing the diversity and of unifying the Hindu society from the point of view of culture content.

At the same time there is an element of "conflict" between westernization and sanskritisation. Most of the castes are faced with a dilemma of making a choice. As not many studies have been made, it is not easy to predict which process is likely to be more dominant. With increased industrialization, greater communication, new occupations, greater education, it seems likely that westernization will be the more dominant process.

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Life Insurance Business

THE Life Insurance Corporation - secured peak business during 1960. The new business amounted to Rs 460 crores, according to provisional figures.

The amount of new business completed during 1955, the year immediately preceding the year of nationalisation, was Rs 260,84 crores.

The Corporation will examine in due course whether in view of the high profits earned the premium rates could be reduced.

This information was given by the Minister of Revenue and Civil Expenditure, Dr B Copala Reddi in Lok Sabha.

Replying to another question Dr Copala Reddi informed the House that foreign business completed by the Life Insurance Corporation of India during 1960 was Rs 9.70 crores. Foreign business in 1957 was Rs 5.40 crores; in 1958 it was Rs 5.62 crores; in 1959, Rs 9.47 crores.

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