

Book Review

The Jajmani System

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Thomas O Beidelman : A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System. Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies, VIII, 1959, pp 86. Price not mentioned.

MR Beidelman's problem is to determine the locus of power within the *jajmani* system in order that it may throw light on the controversial question of whether or not the *jajmani* system is exploitative, (p 1). Beidelman revises Wiser's definition of the *jajmani* system as "a feudalistic system of prescribed, hereditary obligations of payment and of occupational and ceremonial duties between two or more specific families of different castes in the same locality" (p 6). The two bases of this system are caste duties and land. But land tenure is the power-determinant within the *jajmani* system,

Beidelman first examines the influence of caste on the respective roles of *jajman* and *kamin*. 'Upper' castes tend to be *jajmans* while 'Lower' castes tend to be *kamins*. Where Brahmins possess economic-numerical-political power, custom, dogma, superiority in numbers, political connection and control of land may be used to turn the *jajman-kamin* relationship in favour of the Brahmin. But instances are quoted where other castes are more powerful, economically, numerically and politically than the Brahmins.

How Jajmani Is Exploitative

The author shows how the concept of purity and pollution operates in determining hierarchical ordering of occupations such as hair-cutting, washing, leather work, scavenging, etc. Ceremonial duties reinforce caste roles. Etiquette pervades relations. The author, therefore, argues that *jajman-kamin* relations shape more than mere work relations. "They stress values in ritual and social life, each complementing the other and forming a complex matrix in which the economic relations are set" (p 30).

Discussing the determinants of the role of *jajman*, the author singles out numerical or political superiority and land tenure as the two factors which make a *jajman* effective. He shows how control

over land enables him to coerce the *kamin* and to obtain for himself services and payments far beyond those required of the *kamin*. Hence *jajmani* system is an exploitative system although it does provide social security.

The role of *kamin* lies in providing necessary services — secular and ritual — for the *jajman* which the *jajman* cannot obtain elsewhere and which he cannot supply himself due to lack of skill or of sufficient numbers or due to caste restrictions. The solidarity of the *kamin* is also maintained by caste panchayat (trade union) and kinship. But kinship also disrupts *kamin* solidarity. Similarly, factionalism of the upper castes affects the *kamins* as economic dependence cuts across caste ties.

Land and Social Status

There are conflicts within the *jajmani* system. They are caused by the division of *jajmani* rights as a result of increase of population and the growth of the market economy with increased monetization. External political influences have shifted power to lower and numerically stronger castes in some areas. Among other causes of such a shift in power are : land reform laws, employment opportunities irrespective of caste, changes in caste values, education and the breakdown of the isolation of the caste system.

The author further discusses some cases of *jajman kamin* disputes and points out that *kamin's* 'trade unionism' is becoming more and more meaningless, because of a disregard of traditional restrictions on performing certain activities previously assigned to the *kamin*. A *jajman* under an emergency undertakes to do a hitherto forbidden task.

The author therefore concludes that the power determinant in the *jajmani* system is land. The concentration of power in a landed group and the ordering of roles in relation to land seems essentially feudalistic. The superior position

of the *jajman* enables him to get preferential payments, enjoy prestige, and other benefits and enables him to fix caste roles in such a manner as to stabilise his position despite the tensions within *jajman-kamin* relationships.

Beidelman uses the term *jajmani* system to cover the whole of rural social structure. But it should be noted that the term cannot be interpreted to cover all social relations. Firstly, *jajman-kamin* relationships are dyadic, and tend to be limited to the sphere of service relationships, whether economic or ritual. Secondly, *jajman-kamin* relations may develop into patron-client relationship when the bond becomes more personal, intimate and multi-faced. For instance, a carpenter who is a *kamin* to a cultivator may also be a debtor or a tenant enjoying the patronage of his *jajman*. In such a case *jajman-kamin* relationship acquires the nature of patron-client relationship.

This, however, does not always happen. Frequently, the relation between a cultivator *jajman* and a carpenter *kamin* stops at the level of service relationships. When a *jajman* is dissatisfied with the services of a smith, he may engage another. Similarly one smith may compete with another to get a rich *jajman*.

Not the Whole Feudal System

Further, *jajmani* system should be distinguished from the stratification based on land tenurial status into landlords, non-cultivating tenants, cultivating tenants and attached and free agricultural labourers. In Kerala, however, a tenant or an agricultural labourer purely in this capacity is not a *desavakazhi* (a person having hereditary rights of service in a village). It is, therefore, imperative to restrict the *jajmani* system to the economic and ritual service relationships. Other relationships such as, caste, kinship, patron-client, tenurial do overlap. But all these should not be subsumed under the *jajmani* system. To do this is unreal and

highly misleading. *Jajmani* system is not by itself the whole of the feudalistic system as the author thinks but is only a part of feudal and semi-feudal system.

The use of the *jajman* and *Kamin* as blanket terms is an over-simplification, as it ignores vast complexities and rich regional variations. The relationships between a Jat cultivator and his Brahmin priest, carpenter, potter, barber, washerman, *chamar* and *bhangis* have internal variations. All of them are not addressed as *kamins*. The Brahmin priest although he serves a ritually lower cultivating caste, is given due respect. He is never included in the list of *kamin* castes. The smiths occupy a higher status than *chamars* and *bhangis*. They are addressed as *mislry*. It is *chamars* and *bhangis* who are sometimes addressed as *kamins*. Therefore, in accordance with the ritual status and the distance between the service castes and *jajman* castes in the social structure, the latter exercise political and economic control over the former. Similarly, as in the case of the category of *kamins*, there is great internal variation within the category of *jajmans*. Land is owned by many castes and within each caste by many families in different proportions. Even landless households are *jajmans*. A shop-keeper or trader or a temple priest who receives grain payment may not possess any land. Still they command the services of *kamin* castes. In such a case, association of *jajman* with land is not wholly inevitable. Therefore, the terms *jajman* and *kamin* should be taken to represent categories within which differences should be expected. It is a distortion of reality to identify them as 'classes.'

A third point to which I would like to draw the attention is that the problem posed by Beidelman, viz whether or not the *jajmani* system is an exploitative system, has a misplaced emphasis. The author accuses writers such as M N Srinivas and K Cough for not looking at it from the point of view of subjection, asymmetry and conflict, and instead looking for interdependence and tranquility. But the question whether *jajmani* system is exploitative or not loses much of its significance when this system is seen in the light of the general principles of Indian social structure which impinge upon it. The differential basis of ritual

ranking of castes in a scale of subordination and super-ordination is itself 'exploitative' and sets the pattern of subservience. The overlapping of the secular sources of power, land and political control, reinforce the hierarchy.

The crucial question is what happens when there is a discrepancy between the ritual and other elements of dominance? When a ritually higher caste comes into the category of *kamin*, the nature of exploitation is modified. The logic of economic exploitation does not run its full course. Exploitation is therefore a general aspect of the Indian caste structure which is sharpened by the distance between the *jajman* and *kamin* castes in the social structure. It is blurred when there is a discrepancy between different elements of dominance and when the gap between *jajman* and *kamin* castes in the caste hierarchy is not wide.

The author seems to have recognized the point that the *jajmani* relationships tend to reinforce the values of inequality inherent in the

caste system (p 21); but he does not see the problem in this perspective. It should be said to the credit of the author that he also recognizes a situation where ritual superiority of Brahmins is accompanied by secular dependence. But he explains it away by making an absurd comparison of this situation with the position of a priest in western society who though nominally ranked high in society is yet treated as a functionary at a wedding and is only casually invited to the wedding reception, (p 19) The position of Brahmins is entirely different.

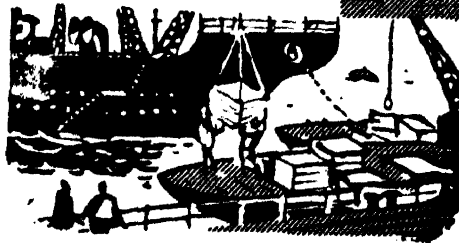
Jajmani system is undergoing changes. The intensity and form of these changes are not the same but vary with respective *jajmans* and *kamins* because they are dyadic relationships. The changing situation admits of vast variations and immense complexities. Sound generalizations can only be built upon a careful comparative study of and intensive research into *jajmani* systems over different regions. Beidelman's is a significant effort in this direction.



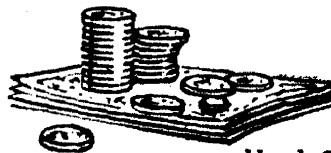
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