Sanskritization and Westernization

A Dynamic View

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An attempt has been made to show that there may be a dynamic interplay between the processes of Sanskritization and westernization which may help us to account for such seeming anachronisms as the high castes, who have had the greatest stake in the old order, revealing a stronger urge for westernization and modernisation than the lower castes, who have had the least stake in the old order.

This is just the opposite of what we have been led to expect on the basis of "classical" accounts of modernisation.

The process of westernization need not be regarded as an "irony" but is an important dimension of the total process of mobility and change in Indian society.

THE observation that the Indian caste system is not absolutely rigid and static has led progressively to various attempts to explain in systematic terms the manner in which change occurs within it. Perhaps the earliest such attempt was the observation that a caste may sometimes pay large dowries to give its daughters in marriage to men of some slightly higher caste. This is the process known as hypergamy.

It has been described and discussed by all of the well-known ethnographers of India who wrote during the last century and the first part of this century. It forms a major preoccupation of J H Hutton's work (1946).

Implicit in this concept of hypergamy is the fact that cash's for any reason are able to become upwardly mobile do so by making themselves ritually and occupationally as much like the higher castes as possible and then ratifying this achievement by applying their newly-found resources to the contracting of up-matrimonies. Once intermarried with another caste group, you are concomitantly equal to it. This has always been the final criterion of status parity in traditional Indian society.

Sanskritization — the Concept

However, upward mobility, even in the caste system, is a broader, more pervasive process than is symbolized by the practice of hypergamy. The latter may, as a matter of fact, lie seen more as a kind of end-product of the overall process, an aspect of the whole phenomenon and nothing more. It is the great utility of M N Srinivas's (1956) concept of Sanskritization that it automatically puts hypergamy in its appropriate place within an overall process of inter-caste mobility which encompasses not only this act of final ratification but also all of the intermediate steps and, indeed, other channels and manifestations of mobility as well which do not necessarily culminate in hypergamy at all.

Srinivas's concept rests ultimately on the notion that the caste system, like all status hierarchies, causes the low to invidiously compare themselves with the high and to try in every way they can to soften, modify, reduce, and even eliminate altogether the basis for these status differences. This not unique to the Indian caste system. What is unique is the manner in which this process must work itself out in India, given the empirical nature of the status system that prevails there. It is this with which Sanskritization comes to grips.

Sanskritization also, it seems to me, deals with something a little different than McKim Marriott's (1955) universalization — parochialization dichotomy. The former subsumes, essentially the same phenomena as the latter but uses them for different analytical ends. Marriott's notion is more particularly useful for dealing with data of this kind when it is being viewed from the standpoint of a folk-urban dimension where one may be concerned with the process of intermingling between elite, urban-centered, and local, village-entered cultural traditions, quite aside from the question of the status implications of this per se. Srinivas's concept is rooted primarily in a concern for the latter.

But Srinivas also speaks of a parallel process, which he terms westernization. Concerning this he observes:

One of the many interesting contradictions of modern Hindu social life is that while the Brahmans are becoming more and more westernized, the other castes are becoming more and more Sanskritized. In the lower reaches of the hierarchy, castes are taking up customs which the Brahmans are busy discarding. As far as these castes are concerned, it looks as though Sanskritization is an essential preliminary to westernization.

Dynamic Relationship

However, I believe we can go farther with this notion of Srinivas's and thereby deepen our understanding of the mobility process in Indian society today. For it seems: probable that at least in some instances, under some circumstances the relationship between Sanskritization and westernization is a more dynamic one than even Srinivas makes apparent in his writings.

Let us realize at the outlet that the caste system is one of the most elaborate attempts at hierarchization of society ever undertaken by man. It has left its mark everywhere on Indian life, but especially it has imbued Indians in general with a finely tuned consciousness of hierarchy per se which does not seem to be disappearing with any particular haste even among the most modernized, westernized of Indians. Among the latter, this sense of hierarchy merely changes its contours slightly so that it can operate effectively even under conditions of so-called democratic society. Attention to seniority and petty permutations of authority are admitted by all to be unusually elaborated even in the most 'rational' and 'progressive' Indian bureaucracies. The academic world, where one might expect the most modern thinking to be applied in such matters is notoriously hierarchized not only with respect to the official university structures but with respect as well to the informal
social structures maintained by students and faculty alike. The charge of "casteism on the campus is so loud and frequent in India that its very persistence and universality makes it almost inaudible.

It is within this setting of pervasive hierarchical thinking and feeling that the interdependency of Sanskritization and westernization may be appreciated. Srinivas has looked at these twin processes from an important degree from the standpoint of the desire of the lower castes to move upward by transforming their ritual and social structure until it conforms more nearly to that of the Brahmans and/or whatever other caste happens to be dominant and, therefore, represents elite status within their experiential ken. Westernization, then, is seen primarily as an 'irony' by which the very clean castes whom the lower castes are aping are giving up the very Sanskrit traits by which the lower castes implicitly acknowledge (by trying to adopt them) their superiority.

Westernization — a Necessity

It is my suspicion that this hitter is more than an irony and actually a new and necessary manifestation for the high castes of the age-old preoccupation of people in general and Indians in particular with hierarchy. This point is to be appreciated when we view Sanskritization and westernization from the standpoint of those who are at the top of the scab... the Brahmans and certain others—rather than from the standpoint of those located at its bottom or somewhere in its middle reaches.

If you are traditionally Brahman and you are at the apex of the ritual hierarchy prevalent in a village, or in a region wherein the approximate ordering of the various castes is reasonably comprehended by most and acknowledged more or less as the basis of social interaction, then Sanskritization for you means watching the lower castes rising up and up beneath you. Then you, "o then, by which I mean, as and to the extent that they are able to actually force recognition of and thereby ratify new status pretensions, the social distance between them and you is diminished.

Years ago, when I first came to Sherupur4 this seemed to be the plight and the complaint of both the Rajput and the Brahman members of the community. Democratization of Indian society, particularly since Independence, has opened up opportunities heretofore inconceivable for Ahir, Murau, Kurmi, Kori and even Chamar castes to Sanskritize themselves; (ie, to purify their rituals, diet, etc) and in general to approach and fraternize with the high castes. Understandably, these long-suppressed and varying humiliated groups have been busy doing just that. In fact, I suggest that one of the prime motives behind Sanskritization is this factor of repressed hostility which manifests itself not in the form of rejecting the caste system but in the form of its victims trying to seize control of it and thereby expiate their frustrations on the same battlefield where they acquired them. Only then can there he a sense of satisfaction in something achieved that is tangible, concrete, and relevant to past experience. If the lower castes rejected the caste system out of band before acting out their hostilities to it by trying to master it they would be left with a hollow sense of nullification, a sense that they never successfully attacked and conquered the thing in terms of which their ideals, their aspirations, their frustrations, in fact their whole perception of life, were formed. Besides this, it is doubtful that they could structure their hostilities and aspirations in any other way as yet because of the very fact that they have remained throughout recorded Indian history illiterate, cowed prisoners of the caste system. Their perceptions of alternative forms must be defined he dim and indecisive.

Old Bases of Power Crumble

Thus, at any rate in 1954, the Brahmans and Rajputs of Sherupur were, speaking to me bitterly about the vast-approaching ‘rule of the lower orders’ in the presence of lower caste persons they would declare that in the ‘old days’, a lower caste man would never dare come as close to a Rajput’s or Brahman’s charpai as in fact his listeners were coming at the present moment! Today, respect (izzat) for the high caste man has ended,’ my informants would loudly proclaim. When some Koris obtained funds from a nearby Community Project training block to construct a new well, the Rajputs regularly stood atom flogging taunts at them for placing their trust in outside agencies (uniformly labelled ‘Government’) who, they averred, would ultimately betray them and make fools of them—in contradistinction to the Rajputs, of course, who, they assured me, had always scrupulously looked after the interests of their lower caste brethren.

For the Brahmans and Rajputs, it was clearly a matter of seeing the bases of their old power and authority melting away before their eyes and being prevented from doing much about it, as indeed they could in the ‘old days,’ by the impartial hand, of secular government. Or looked at from the point of view of the thesis being enunciated here, these high castes were watching anxiously while the floor of the status system rose underneath them with the consequence that the old forms of social distance by which they bale always differentiated themselves from their fellow-Hindus were evaporating. As Srinivas puts it:

The three main axes of power in the caste system fire die ritual, the economic, and the political ones, and the possession of power in any one sphere usually leads to power in the other two.

The Brahmans and Rajputs of Sherupur were losing their political and to some extent their economic power through which for centuries they had successfully enforced the traditional hierarchical ordering of the castes and the social distinctions upon which this was based. In fact, the political coup de grace was delivered in February labour on part-time basis or far of 1961 when for the first time secret-ballot elections were held for the office of village pradhan. With the election of an Ahir, the perennial control maintained by the Rajputs, and acquiesced in by the Brahmans,7 was decisively shattered. The middle and lower castes were jubilant, their attitude being vividly illustrated by the comment of a Kori friend, who said with real emotion in his voice, ‘The lower castes are coming up now.’ For they saw in this political victory the possibility of a widened scope for the eventual attainment of status parity with the Brahmans and Rajputs — a parity which my experience with these villagers has demonstrated to me is associated, as
srinivas says, with the desire to become ever more orthodox and 'clean' in the ritual, commensal, and connubial senses.

Where Westernization Comes in

But even though the Brahmans and Rajputs are clearly losing ground in the status struggle taking place within the traditional caste hierarchy, they are not taking things lying down by any means. This is where westernization enters the picture in a manner which is dynamically inter-related with the events taking place under the rubric of Sanskritization. For I believe that in proportion as the Brahmans and Rajputs are losing ground in the old caste hierarchy, they are reaching out in a direction we can best call westernization (or perhaps to-day the term 'modernization' would be somewhat more appropriate) in order to obtain new sources of status and power which effectively continue to give them the feeling that they are maintaining suitable social distance between themselves and those whom they have traditionally defined as low.

Although not the sole factor responsible, it seems likely that this process helps account for the, by now widely observed fact that mobility in the direction of urban and modern employment is more preponderant, in relative terms, among the high than among the low castes. Edwin Eames (1951) refers to it with some surprise in a village (Madhopur) which he studied in Uttar Pradesh. He says:

It was assumed that the greatest amount of migration in urban centres would be by members of these castes which had lost their functions in village life and those who were in the weakest economic position in the village. However, the largest group going outside the village are Thakurs who are the second largest population group in Madhopur. They are in the top economic position of the village and the owners of the land. (pp 13-14)

Oscar Lewis (1955) found the same thing in a Jat village near Delhi and his comments on the phenomenon are highly pertinent to this discussion:

...it is the higher caste Jats and Brahmans at Rampur who have taken the greatest initiative in getting outside work, who have the best-paid jobs and the greatest number of them. If such conditions are prevalent in other Indian villages, it might mean that the inequalities of the caste system will be perpetuated, for the members of the higher castes would be the ones to benefit most in an industrialized India. (pp 301-302)

In all instances, the reality appears to be at wide variance with classical expectations concerning mobility in modernizing societies, where it is held that the landless and the impoverished are compelled to move towards the city in search of cash employment while the landed and the well-off are content to remain proportionately longer in their rural habitat.

False Dichotomies

Granted, this latter phenomenon is also occurring on a major scale in India today and promises to become even more intensified should the rate of industrialization materially increase during the next twenty-five to fifty years. It is not necessary for us to make any choices between false dichotomies in this matter. What is at issue here is only the surprisingly high prevalence of elite mobility and the correspondingly surprisingly low prevalence of low caste mobility by comparison with the former. It is this which is "unclassicar by contrast with the West.

It suggests that the higher castes are for some reason if nesting a large anionni of deliberate energy in westernization, proportionately much more than the lower castes (at least in villages of the size and situation of Sherupur and those studied by Karnes and Lewis), while the low castes are investing a large amount of deliberate energy in Sanskritization, proportionately much more than the higher castes, or so it would seem. This makes sense if we recognize the pervasiveness of hierarchical thinking and feeling in India and consequently realize that the Brahmans and Rajputs have little choice left to them than to turn to westernization as a means of maintaining the social distance between themselves and the lower castes which is no longer possible within lite old order in the face of the latter's current ability to Sanskritize themselves. If you are already Sanskritized, as are the Brahmans and the Rajputs (although I do not wish to imply that the two are fully equivalent ritually or in any other way, because they are not), then you can't go any higher up in the traditional stratification order. If you can't maintain things as they are through the application of political and economic power then you can only go down or accept the notion of equality which, in effect, means accepting the nullity of the caste system itself and hierarchical relationships in general. This is patently impossible for the high castes, with their deeply embedded conception of their inherent superiority, and so they must move outside the caste system winch spawned them in order to preserve their pretensions to paramount status in Indian society.

New Bases of Superiority

This is done in Sherupur and elsewhere by converting their traditional intellectual skills into economic advantages, and nepotic connections into opportunities for obtaining modern education and what is commonly called 'service' by which is meant a job hi Government (either provincial or central) or in modern industry. To the extent that they succeed in this endeavour, Brahmans and Rajputs preserve a measure of superiority over their lower caste compatriots in their local community (where not more widely) which mere Sanskritization is incapable of matching. For the lower castes are without education or any tradition of learning, they are without much economic power, and they lack well-elaborated kinship structures which can be avenues of connection and mobility outside the local milieu. Without these assets, they cannot, hope to attain very much modern education, much less opportunities for "service". And even in those rare instances where a low caste family does acquire the means they frequently turn their resources to the building up of their traditional status. In the village adjoining Sherupur there is a Kori who has made considerable money out of the building construction business. He has symbolized his new-found opulence not by becoming a 'modern maif but by building a residence in the village which outsides the high castes in its traditional architectural style. Furthermore, he is completing construction of the largest and most ornate dhuramniula (a rest house for religious pilgrjms) in the area, one which eclipses by far the numerous comparable structures thereabout associated with high caste benefac-
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tora. The Brahman family which resides in the same hamlet still refuses to interact with this Kori's family and the head of this Brahman household is an official in the Sugar Cane Department of the Government of Uttar Pradesh!

Sanskritization not Distinctive Enough

We may see this same phenomenon from the standpoint of the high cables themselves. Those families among the Brahmans and Rajputs in Sherupur who have been unsuccessful in converting their traditional assets into opportunities for sons to get a good education and "service" are depredated even by their own caste fellows on this account. Where Sanskritization is their only claim to status, they are insufficiently distinct from the lower castes, especially from the middle groups like Ahir and Kurmi who got modest amounts of land out of Zamindari abolition. As a result, there is much anxiety and fretting on this score within the ranks of the Brahmans and Rajputs. Many a father from these castas has approached me in the hope that I might be able to intervene on his behalf with a business executive or government official on behalf of a son whom he wants to get placed in "service". Only one lower caste person has over so approached me and this represents a very unusual case from many standpoints. 8

Strictly economic grounds are insufficient to explain what is happening and the fact that in Sherupur all outside "white collar" jobs are well as an overwhelming preponderance of all outside jobs) are held by the castes who rank highest in the traditional hierarchy. For these high castes have practically all the land in the village and are in every material respect infinitely better off than their low caste brethren. In fact, I have encountered instances where a high caste family has urged its son or sons out into the modern job market even where having done so has left the village farm short-handed and has entailed real economic hardship for the rest of the family. They would rather have a greater proportion of the agricultural work done by the landless castes than is customary, and accept whatever other hardship that may be involved, if that will assure them the ability to count among the accoutrements of their contemporary status the fact that one or more of their sons are performing prestigious work somewhere in the modern society beyond the village. For then they do not have to depend for their high position upon the rickety scale of Sanskritization alone, a criterion that becomes meaningless to the Brahmins and Rajputs in precisely the degree to which the castes beneath them acquire more and more Sanskritization in their own right.

Mirage of Equality

Meanwhile, the low castes expend a major share of their energy on Sanskritization. In other words, they are salving their wounded collective ego born of past ages of degradation and exploitation by pursuing the Mirage of Equality with the Brahmins and other high castes. By the time they reach their destination, however, they will discover that the Brahman has himself vacated the spot and moved on to the higher hill of Westernization where he still gazes contemptuously down upon them from an elevated porch. In fact, the motive-power for the latter's Inning done so will have been supplied by the process of Sanskritization itself which, as its very success caused it to be coveted by and sought by others, caused the high castes to abandon it in favour of new realms of status. No doubt it will be at this point that the lower castes also commence abandoning their craze for Sanskritization and then the book will have to close on this concept, as the resultant new Indian society comes to grips with the problem of hierarchie in radically different and at this juncture hardly foreseeable terms.

It is not intended that this, analysis be construed as an attempt to provide the explanation of change and mobility in Indian society today. It is not even intended that this analysis be taken as applicable in all situations where issues of change and mobility arise. India is too complex a society, and industrialization and modernization too complex processes, for a single general concept to be able to account for all facets of the transformation that is being brought about. All that has been attempted here is to show that, there may be an important dynamic interplay between the processes of Sanskritization and Westernization which helps us account for such seeming anachronisms as the high castes (who obviously have had the highest stake in the old order) revealing stronger urges toward Westernization and modernization, as symbolized by occupational mobility patterns, than the lower castes (who have had the least stake in the old order). This is the opposite of what we have been led to expect on the basis of 'classical' accounts of modernization derived from Western data. In short, it is hoped that it will be seen that Srinivas's notion of westernization need not be regarded merely as an 'irony' but as a necessary component of a thorough comprehension of at least one important dimension of the total process of mobility and change in Indian society.

NOTES

1. By 'earliest' I have in mind the 'scientific past,' which for Anthropology commences little more than a century ago.

2. Hypergamy may be a comparatively late manifestation in India. Srinivas (1956) is correct. He says: Over seventy years ago, the institution of bride-price seems to have prevailed among some sections of Mysore Brahmans. But with westernisation, and the demand it created for educated boys who had nice jobs, dowry became popular. The better educated Brahman, to whom the larger the dowry is parents demanded for him. The ape at which girls married shot up . . . Nowdays, urban and middle-class Brahmans are rarely able to get their girls married before they are eighteen . . . Child widows are rare, and shaming the heads of widows is practically a thing of the past. (p 490).


1. Sherupur is a pseudonym for a village in District Faizabad of Uttar Pradesh, which I studied first in 1954-55 under a Fulbright Student Grant and which I further studied from 1959 to 1961 under post-doctoral fellowships from the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health respectively.

At that time, a story was common knowledge of how the head man of a neighbouring village, a Rajput, had come to suspect two Kasliwals of committing an act of theft in his house. In the traditional high caste fashion, the old Rajput summoned the two Kasliwal before him, administered a beating to them with a lathi (a bamboo stick) locked them in an out building and told them he would keep them there until they 'confessed.' Finally, in order
to gain release, the two Korin 'confessed.' The old Rajput released them, whereupon the spend immediately to the local police station and filed a complaint against him. At the ensuing trial, the Rajput was found guilty, fined Rs 500, and given three months' imprisonment. Since then, there have been no further reports of high castes administering summary punishment to low caste persons. The Government has seen to it that those days are ended for good. And in this, we see one of the ways in which the previous political power of the upper castes has waned.

The leader of the Brahmans in Shemu, midable. The Brahmans and Rajputs lost some of their lands to lower castes due to the redistribution which followed dissolution of the Zamindari system of land control. This occurred in 1951 in Uttar Pradesh.

The leader of the Brahmans in Shempur told me that in the years since Independence, but prior to 1961, when the secret ballot was introduced in the election of village headman, he had come to verbal agreement with the perennial Rajput headman llial he would not oppose him as long as he did nothing to harm the interests of the Brahmans in the community. In the 1961 elections, however, this Brahman decided to oppose the Rajput pradhan because he claimed, the latter had gone back on his word. However, in this election, all the high-caste candidates were defeated.

The son in question is an unusually intelligent young Korin who is now studying for his B A Final. Roth parents of this boy are also niti extint. His inextint. rurally high intelligence (a fact I have determined through the administration of psychological tests plus direct observation) and ate in innumerable ways distinct from their average caste-mates.

I am aware that all I have said here depends upon one's assumption that tire notion of Sanskritization is a va­lid one in the first place. Many social scientists both in bulla and abroad have opposed the concept. So have many who regard themselves as Classicists or linguists. Without going into the substance of these arguments, here, I do nevertheless want to state clearly that I do regard Sanskritization as a useful, meaning­ful, empirically defensible concept. One cannot help suspecting that some of the objections arc trivialities and deliberate misreadings which are motivated not so much by the desire to clarify and amplify as by the desire to make rather vain displays of "erudition."

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