Caste in Kerala

A Preface to the Elections

Robert L. Hardgrave Jr

The ubiquity of caste in the politics of modern India has increasingly become a byword of political analysis in the subcontinent. "Caste is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those most vocal in condemning it," writes M N Srinivas, "that it is everywhere the unit of social action." Caste, as a fundamental aspect of the social and economic structure of India, is undoubtedly a major parametric variable of the Indian political system. It is, however, only one of several such variables, and its significance demands systematic analysis. This paper seeks to analyze the emergence of caste as a significant variable in contemporary Kerala through an exploration of the breakdown of traditional society.

The complexity of religious, regional, and caste differentiation in Kerala led Vivekananda to call Kerala a "madhouse" of communalism. Of Kerala's population, 64 per cent is Hindu, 23 per cent Muslim, and 61 per cent Christian. The Muslim community, called the Nambudiri, is an almost exclusively male society. Among the Hindus, there are approximately 420 castes (jati) in Kerala, and the average village contains 17 caste groups. Despite the dispersed spatial pattern of settlement, there is a definite social nucleus and the castes are elaborately ranked in the ritual hierarchy, each separated not only by endogamy, commensality, dialectal variation, and ritual pollution, but by spatial distance as well. A Nayar, for example, traditionally may approach a Nambudiri but must not touch him. An Ezhava must keep a distance of 36 steps from a Brahmin, and a Pulayan must not approach him within 96 steps. There are even castes so defiling that their mere sight alone is polluting. The elaboration of caste ranking among Hindus of Kerala forms an almost perfect unilinear ladder and fulfills in extreme degree McKim Marriott's four structural conditions for maximal elaboration of caste ranking.

... (1) the concrete structural units of a community—in this case its hereditary, generally endogamous groups—must themselves be numerous. (2) Secondly, their members as corporate groups must interact with members of other groups in a clearly stratified order. (3) Furthermore, so that members of such castes in a community may agree with each other on an elaborate ranking of castes, their interactions as individuals must not deviate widely from the stratified order of interaction among their respective castes taken as wholes. (4) Finally, the totality of such a community structure must be separated from any possible confusion which it may suffer by connection with inconsistent structures outside.

Caste Ranking

Caste ranking places the Nambudiri at the peak of the ritual hierarchy. The Nambudiri Brahmins, numbering 8 per cent of the Hindu population, command ritual status, but are not a major force in politics. Of the lower castes, there are a few Kshatriya descendants of the old Malabar kingdoms, and there are no indigenous Vaisyas. The most important caste ranking below the Nambudiri is the Nayar, the traditional warrior. The Nayars or Nairs are a prosperous landowning community and number 25.3 per cent of the Hindus in Kerala. Below the Nayars are ranked the traditional service castes, such as the barber and washerman, which are numerically insignificant. The highest of the polluting castes is the traditional toddy-tapper, the Ezhava, or Tiyyar as he is called in Malabar. Numbering 44.4 per cent of the Hindu population, the economically depressed Ezhavas are dominant in Palghat District, where they cultivate the lands of the wealthy Tamil Brahmins, numbering 20.4 per cent of the Hindu population. The most important caste in this group is the Pulaya (Cherumon), which until 1850 was the caste of agricultural serfs of the Nayars, temple servants, and Brahmins. Each of these castes in the ritual hierarchy is in turn subdivided into a number of smaller endogamous communities.
E.R.W. Boiler Tubes

For trouble-free steam raising in all applications calling for rigid specifications, Electric Resistance Weld tubes are in every respect equal to corresponding seamless tubes. High frequency current ensures efficient welding, and normalising is carried out in controlled atmosphere furnaces to produce a ductile tube with a smooth, blue finish.

We supply E.R.W. boiler and superheater tubes from our Jamshedpur Works to meet the bulk of the Indian Railway's demand. These tubes meet all the technical requirements of Indian Railways.

Our E.R.W. tubes meet all the tests specified by Lloyd's Register of Shipping. Indian Tube is on Lloyd's Register of Shipping's list of approved manufacturers.

Our E.R.W. tubes for land boilers are accepted by the D.G.S. & O. and comply with the Indian Boiler Regulations. We also carry ready stocks of this category at our Warehouses.

Indian Tube

THE INDIAN TUBE COMPANY (1952) LIMITED
A Tata-Swamco and Lloyds Enterprise
subcastes. There are, for example, more than 100 Nayar subcastes. Each sub-
caste is, within the position of the larg-
er caste unit, ranked hierarchically.

**Systems of Tenure**

The ritual hierarchy of caste reflects the traditional relationship of each caste
to the land, which was a fundamental determinant of wealth, power, and social
status in traditional Kerala. The systems of land tenure in Kerala are extremely
complex. The Malabar Land Law, for example, recognized 28 different kinds of
tenure, ranging from perpetual, ir-
redeemable leases to tenancy-at-will.

For purposes of analysis, however, a land system of ideal type may be con-
structed.

The kingdoms of Kerala before the coming of the British were divided into a
system of districts (nads), headed by feudal chiefains under the Raja,
and which in turn divided into villages (desams). Political authority in the
villages rested with the elder of the wealthiest Nayar household. The village
lands were owned by the royal lineage itself, by the chiefains of the nads, by
temples under Brahmin management, or by a Nambudiri family, the latter
being most prevalent. The landlord (jentni) could sell land only with the consent of
the chiefain or Raja and then only to families of the appropriate caste. Further, he could not evict ten-
ant, village servants, or serfs without their consent, unless they committed a
great crime. On the other hand, land
ownership included judicial rights over the population of the village. The Nambudiri lands were held intact by a tradition which permitted only the eldest son of the family to marry, the younger sons forming liaisons with Nayar women. This hypergamous rel-
ationship strengthened the ties be-
tween the two dominant castes of the region. The Nambudiri jentni, retaining part of the land for cultivation by his
serfs, leased the rest to Nayar matril-
lineal households (tara
davat). The Nayar
lineages, usually numbering four or
five in a village, held the land under hereditary kaman tenure. In return for land rights, the Nayars owed mili-
tary services to the landlord and to the
chiefain of the nad. A portion of the
produce from the lands would also be
rendered. The Nayar estates were held intact through duolocal matrilineal
kinship, and control over the lands was exercised by the elder (kanakkaran). A portion of the lands was retained
for cultivation by the serfs of the
household, the rest being leased under

The vertical system of rights and obligations, however, was not wholly
confined to the village. Such overlap-
ning, as hypergamy among the upper
castes, contributed to the unity of the
nad. Communications, nevertheless,
were truncated. Despite the inland waterways of central Kerala, heavy
rainfall, seasonal floods, and the
mountainous terrain severely limited contacts beyond the local level. The
horizontal extension of caste geographi-
cally was thus limited, and communica-
tions were largely a function of caste
position. The internal organization of a caste was localized. Among the
Ezhava and Pulaya, for example, the
caste group was usually cotermous
with the village. The smaller castes of
village servants had assemblies which
included usually no more than four or
five adjacent villages. The assembly of the retainer Nayar caste was often
limited to a single village and at most
extended over two to four adjacent
small villages. Within this area (called
tara, Calicut and Kollam in Cochin) the
Nayars exercised judicial authority.
The area of social interaction for the
Nayars, apart from their participation
in war, was the nad. Among the chiefs and royal lineages, such interaction was
limited to the kingdom. Only the Nam-
budiri transcended the political unit to
a realm of horizontal interaction which
included the whole of Kerala. Thus,
for the non-Brahmins of Kerala, terri-
torial segmentation translated the unity
and uniformity of a caste over a wider
area. "Territorial segmentation," as
suggested by Eric Miller, "stressed the interdependence of all the castes at the
village level and inhibited the develop-
ment of internal solidarity over wide areas. Cleavages were between (geographical) political units, never between castes."

**Introduction to Ryotwari**

The traditional social and economic structure was little affected by change
in the years before 1792. In that year, however, the British promulgated a
fixity of land tenure under the ryot-
wari system. The principle of the sys-
tern is that the Government collects land revenue directly from the cultiva-
tor, who is assumed also to be the free-
hold proprietor. In Kerala, as in most of
India, they were not the same persons.
"Instead of finding landlords and ten-
ants operating through a system of
prices, bargaining, and contracts, the
British found a maze of caste and cus-
tom regulating inter-family relations-
ships. Where the British expected to
find an owner they found a profusion
OVER
20,000
TIMES A
MINUTE...

It works out to nearly 900 million Charminar cigarettes sold every month! Yes, Charminar is certainly the most popular cigarette in India—by far! Why? Because no other cigarette can match Charminar’s rich flavour and unique taste. How does The Vazir Sultan Tobacco Company do it? With quality tobaccos, special processes and expert know-how... in the largest cigarette factory in South-East Asia!

Experts choose only the finest tobaccos, developed specially for Charminar. Skilled workers prepare the leaves. Scientists laboratory-check each batch. Connoisseurs blend the tobaccos, which are triple-matured. Next, an extra process exclusive to Charminar. Only then do the tobaccos go to the automatic machines for rapid, 'untouched-by-hand' manufacture... to produce over 20,000 Charminars a minute!

There's nothing like Charminar — India's greatest cigarette!

THE VAZIR SULTAN TOBACCO COMPANY LIMITED
MAKERS OF INDIA'S GREATEST CIGARETTE!
of overlapping claims. Overriding these rights, the British recognized the janni landlord as the absolute owner of the land. The customary limitations upon the janni were disregarded, and the kannakkaran was recognized only as a leaseholder and as such liable to be turned off the land. The landlord was thus for the first time invested with the right of eviction and could, as well, raise rents to meet his pleasure.

In the nineteenth century, subordinate tenancy was ill-defined, and land was often held only by oral lease. By 1880, evictions had thrown roughly one tenant in five off his holding. Land reform legislation, in attempting to remedy the situation, gradually granted security of tenure to most tenants, but such reform, nevertheless, offered opportunity for abuse. The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929, for example, granted the landlord the right to evict all categories of tenants if he desired to resume lands for his own maintenance or that of his family. The actual cultivation of such lands could, without violation of the act, be assumed by agricultural labor.

Arms Disbanded

With Pax Britannica, the armies of the Kerala kingdom were disbanded, and the Nayar warriors returned to their ancestral estates. Gradually polyandrous marriage among the Nayars began to die out, and with monogamy, men assumed rights and obligations to their children. The matrilineage gradually disintegrated, and the great taravad household gave way to the elementary family. The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 permitted Nayar men to register their marriages with the authorities, and in so doing, the man was legally bound to maintain his wife and children. Upon his death, the lands passed, not to the taravad, but to his children. Further legislation, the Malabar Marumakkatayam (Matriliny) Act of 1933 permitted a man for the first time to claim an individual share of the ancestral estate as his personal property. Such changes in the Nayar kinship system were not without affect upon the Nambudiri janni. The Nambudiri Act of 1933 permitted the marriage of the younger sons to Nambudiri girls and the division of the ancestral estates for inheritance by each son.

The increasing subdivision and fragmentation of holdings, as a result of changes in the kinship system and growing population pressure, reduced the income of cultivating families to the subsistence level and reduced the efficiency of agricultural production. In Malabar District, for example, there are today "cultivators tilling plots less than a tenth of an acre in size; there are landowners who have leased holdings to intermediaries and then sub-let portions of those same lands from their own tenants as cultivators; and there are tenants holding lands on half a dozen tenures from as many landlords who have in turn sub-let them to fifty or more sub-tenants."

As the holdings became smaller, many of the Ezhava varumpatam tenants were pushed off the land to join the expanding ranks of agricultural labour, and of those who continued to maintain holdings, progressively larger numbers were forced to supplement their income through employment on the lands of others.

Acceleration of Change

An acceleration of economic change came in 1846, with the building of permanent roads, in 1861 with the railway, and, foremost, with the introduction of a cash economy based upon plantation estates of tea, coffee, rubber, cashew, and coconaut. Economic crises and fragmentation, which rendered many of the old household estates uneconomic, brought lands to the market. The Syrian Christians and Muslim traders, exploiting the new economic opportunities of the cash economy, invested in lands as they came up for sale. The plantations attracted Pulayas and Ezhavas as coolie labour, but these low castes of the Hindu hierarchy were rarely able to accumulate sufficient savings to invest in land. Rather, having lost the security of tenure or serfdom, they were subjected to the vagaries of a cash economy dependent upon a fluctuating international market. They became caught in an accelerating process of pauperization.

Concomitant with the developments of fragmentation and the introduction of a cash economy came an increasing spatial mobility, underlining the vertical unity of the village. The village was no longer a closed economic unit; it was no longer self-sufficient for food and services. Population pressure, the diminution of land holdings, and the availability of employment on the plantations loosened the vertical ties between castes at the village level. The traditional relationship between the janni or kannakkaran and the agricultural labourers, the system by which the soil was tilled by hereditary right and obligation and for which payment was made in kind, gave way to periodic wage employment. Likewise, the introduction of machine-made goods rendered many of the traditional caste services unnecessary. This factor, together with their expanding population, forced many of the service castes into agricultural wage labour and seasonal employment.

As the vertical economic ties between castes weakened at the village level, so too was there a loosening of ritual relationships. Elaborate ceremonies, requiring the participation of all village castes, were held less frequently. Ceremonies increasingly came to be confined within a single caste. Further, the political and judicial authority of the Nayar assembly broke down, and other castes, no longer tied to the Nayar households, refused to recognize the legitimacy of their authority. Inter-caste disputes passes almost entirely to the courts, and internal disputes within a caste increasingly came to be settled by the caste council, rather than, as often in the past, by referring it to the Nayar assembly.

Break-up of Caste Ties

The disintegration of the vertical relationship between castes, however, did not liberate the lower castes from their depressed position in the ritual hierarchy. Traditionally, the elaboration of the ritual hierarchy reflected the economic position of the constituent castes. The caste system historically was not rigid, for as a caste gained economic power, a commensurate ritual rank usually followed. Caste ranking in Kerala reflected such a process, but in the development of its linear elaboration, a rigidity stifled the movement of castes in the hierarchy, freezing, as it were, the lower castes in their positions of subservience. Only the Muslims and Christians, both being outside the hierarchy, were able to exploit new economic opportunities, and in so doing, to raise themselves in social status. The process of pauperization initiated by economic change accentuated the economic disparity between castes, seeming almost to sanction the traditionally high correlation between ritual rank and economic position.

As the vertical ties between castes disintegrated under the impact of fragmentation of landholdings and the emergence of a cash economy, the horizontal spatial tie between members of the same caste expanded. Communications broke down the solidarity of the nad, and in place of the cleavage between political units, there emerged
The Bank of Baroda has been handling foreign business for many years. Today, the Bank has branches in London, East Africa, Fiji Islands, Mauritius, and East Pakistan.

The Bank of Baroda through any of its foreign branches or its correspondents is fully equipped to offer all the services needed in foreign trade and to handle every type of foreign exchange business—whether opening Letters of Credit, the negotiation and collection of export bills, draft bills and drafts, foreign remittances, credit information, etc., and is always willing and prepared to assist you in solving your problems concerning imports, exports, and foreign travel with prompt and efficient service.

THE BANK OF BARODA LIMITED
(Est. 1917) Head Office: Baroda

a basic cleavage between castes. Communications facilitated a "transition from a system in which castes were interdependent within small areas to a system in which they are becoming widely ramifying classes in opposition to one another." 22 Communications in the process of social mobilization stimulated an awareness in each caste of its position vis-a-vis the social, economic, and political system as a whole.

**Nayars Vs Ezhavas**

Long subject to deprivation by the upper castes and increasingly self-conscious of its position, the Ezhava, freed from the dependency of the vertical ties and having transcended territorial segmentation in horizontal extension, came slowly to organize themselves into associations. In the early years of the century, the Sahodara Sangam and the Thiyya Mahajana were founded, but it was only through the Shri Narayana Guruswamy Dharma Paripalana Sangha (S N D R) that the Ezhava community organized throughout the Malayalam region for social uplift. While advocating the abolition of caste with the slogan, "One God, one religion and one caste," the Ezhavas at the same time attempted to Sanskritize their ritual so that they might gain a higher position in the ritual hierarchy. Their social reforms, however, little affected die position in the hierarchy. Indeed, the efforts for the uplift of the Ezhavas were seen by the Nayars as a threat to their entrenched position of economic privilege. In 1905 in central Travancore, for example, the Nayars opposed the admission of Ezhavas into the Government schools. The Nayars further opposed dress reforms, i.e., the covering of breasts, among the lower castes. The Ezhava caste association became increasingly concerned with politics and began to exert its influence in order to gain reservation of seats in the Government services, the legislature, and in universities. In opposition to the Congress organization in Kerala, which they saw as Nayar-dominated, the Ezhavas supported the British Raj in an effort to gain special considerations.

The Nayars, active in the Congress, had also gained ascendancy in the administration of Travancore and Cochin States and in Malabar District of Madras. As the Christians, the Nayars responded readily to Western education and took full advantage of the opportunities it offered to extend the economic and political powers of their community.

The Nambudiri Brahmans, the major landowners and by no means a depressed caste, has been slow to respond to Western education and to the opportunities of the new economy. In 1908, the more progressive elements of the Nambudiri community organized the Yogaksema movement for certain social reforms and for the study of English. Rapidly the association became politicized and, as the Ezhavas' S N D P, demanded the reservation of seats.

The most highly organized community of Kerala in these early years, as today, was the Christian. Each of the Christian sects, through its system of schools and churches, had formed associations, the most important being the Roman Catholic community. The Muslims, too, formed communal organizations for the advancement of their community interests.

**Communities and Parties**

Education and an accompanying high degree of political literacy, together with increasingly bad economic conditions, a restless youth frustrated in ambition, and the growing ranks of the unemployed, have generated an explosive political atmosphere in Kerala, in which each community seemingly tries to better itself at the expense of the other. But, the coalitions and oppositions of the communities of Kerala in the years since independence reflect not so much the politics of caste as the politics of class in the guise of caste. A caste's action politically will be united only in so far as its membership is homogeneous. To the degree that there is a fundamental economic disparity within the caste, so the caste will be divided in its interests.

In Kerala, the elaboration of caste ranking and the generally common economic position shared by members of a caste, together with the high correlation between caste rank and economic position, have given rise to a political situation in which the most significant actors are castes and communities. While these communities are by no means wholly united, there is, nevertheless, a tendency toward an alignment of major communities with different parties. These socio-political constellations, reflecting a superimposition of ritual rank, social status, and economic position, represent essentially a class orientation. Although in Kerala, as in the West, various crosspressures cut across caste/class lines, the high correlation between ritual rank and economic position has given caste a solidarity and a significance in its political role which is unparalleled in the rest of India. 13

**Notes**

8 Walter C Neale, op cit, p 221.
11 Shea, "Implementing Land Reform in India" op cit, p 5.
12 Miller, op cit, p 418.
But YOU remain really smart in

MAFATLAL

GROUP

COTTON/'TERYLENE'

Whatever the heat, the crush and rush—
you keep looking really smart. This is
the promise of Cotton/'Terlyene' Suits,
and Shirts, by the MAFATLAL GROUP.

Huge saving on washing charges!
Clothes made from Cotton/'Terlyene'
can be washed at home. Think of the
saving on laundry and shop's bills! In
addition, Cotton/'Terlyene' Suits,
and Shirts + do not shrink or stretch.
+ require little water—dry very fast.
+ retain inserted pleats and while sharp
crease, + are ideal for
long-lasting office wear.

Yours—the coolness of cotton, the smartness of 'Terlyene'!