RESEARCH ARTICLE

Caste and Agrarian Relations in Pre-Modern India

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Thank you very much, friends of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies, and others who are interested and are listening in.[1] I am grateful for this opportunity to speak on a theme that touches on factors that have profoundly affected the general history of India, viz., agrarian conditions and the nature of the caste system. Both of these have undoubtedly changed over time – some aspects have disappeared while others have become more complex; but much, too, has withstood all change.

I shall start with a working definition of the caste system, and then go on to offer a narrative of the agrarian history of India as influenced and shaped by the evolution of the caste system.

Let us take the caste system as it has existed in its final form, that is, from about a hundred or two hundred years ago. It was essentially a special system of class division in society. Hierarchical division exists in all societies in various forms even today, there being class divisions between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, and so on. But the caste system is a class division of a special kind. It is defined by particular institutions such as endogamy (marriage only within one's caste) and ritual pollution, these being features of hierarchy that do not exist in other class-divided societies.

The caste system is thus a division based essentially on birth, since unions between members of different castes are prohibited.[2] Secondly, it is defined by occupation. A caste in its classic form usually has a particular occupation assigned to it, and these occupations are set in a hierarchical order that is fixed by one's birth. Brahmans are

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[1] This is an edited version of the Annual Oration of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies, delivered online by Professor Habib on December 17, 2021.

[2] It is true that according to the *Dharmashāstras*, a man can marry a woman from the next lower caste (*varna*) once he has taken to wife a woman of his own caste. But in practice, this mode of marriage has long fallen into disuse.

at the top; Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras follow, in that order; and then, spurned and humiliated, come the outcastes. Every caste has an occupation assigned to it; and this means that there is not only the larger *varna* classification – four castes and the outcastes, that is to say, five categories – but there are numerous *jatis* or, let us say, subcastes, again stabilised by endogamy and with a particular occupation assigned to each by tradition. Finally, there is the whole matter of purity and pollution, in Hindi called *chūthchhāt*. The outcastes are "untouchables," and a person from a superior caste does not sit or eat with them. There are, thus, a large number of features established by a particular ideology of purity and pollution that make the classical caste system totally different from other hierarchical orders, such as containing slavery or serfdom, that have existed elsewhere.

By thus describing this caste system, I do not mean to imply that it came into existence all of a sudden in its final form, or that it has operated totally and entirely in this form from the very beginning of its existence. It had its early beginnings, and then the evolution of its particular features and stages of territorial expansion within our subcontinent, and also regional and local variations. I am mainly concerned here with those aspects of its development which relate to agrarian history. And so, after this brief comment on the classical caste system, I shall now turn to the agrarian history of India, especially its beginnings.

The Indian plains constitute one of the four or five major agrarian domains in the pre-modern Old World: China, the European plains, the Central Asian steppes, the Nile and Tigris valleys, and then the Indian plains. In pre-modern history, the Indian plains accounted for a fairly large proportion of the world's agrarian population, though archaeology tells us that agrarian history began distinctly later in India than in China and West Asia.

Wheat and barley cultivation began in India after 7000 BC, with the earth pierced only with the manually wielded hoe, yielding, therefore, a very low rate of output. Rice seems to have come to north India from China around 2000 BC or a little earlier. (One must here be on guard against the tendency of some Indian archaeologists to assign impossibly early dates to their supposed finds. That is a habit that has unfortunately grown during the last 50 years.)

Now, it was during this period (around 7000 BC and later) that what Gordon Childe called the Neolithic Revolution took place in the Near East. Essentially this meant that after cattle domestication, cultivation with the plough would be the next step. But there was no iron, and therefore, where there were dense forests, neither agriculture nor urban culture could take root. Thus, the Indus Civilisation, whose dates are about 2500–1800 BC, could not advance beyond the line of 30 inches or at the most 40 inches of annual rainfall. We would like to know more about the Indus Civilisation and whether there was any form of caste system in that society, but as the inscriptions on its seals have not been deciphered, it is better not to speculate on

it, and instead come to the time of the *Rigveda* or the early Indo-Aryan settlements, datable to about 1500 BC and thereafter. In the time of the *Rigveda*, the "Āryas" practically occupied the same area as the Indus Valley Civilisation, perhaps with some settlements piercing the Jamuna–Ganga *doab*, but still not going beyond the 40-inch line of annual rainfall. That means that the major forests were still uncleared.

In the *Rigveda*, there is very little that one can spot about the caste system except in the tenth book, in the famous hymn about Purusha's sacrifice where four classes are mentioned, viz., Brahmans, Rajanyas (that is, Kshatriyas), Vaishyas, and Shudras. Such a class categorisation could have been mentioned in any other text in the world because every culture had its classes. Here, however, the major difference is that in time, a whole set of beliefs in degrees of (non-hygienic) purity and pollution developed out of a seemingly simple social division. The Brahmans, we are told even in the above-cited hymn in the *Rigveda*, came out of the mouth of Purusha; the Rajanyas or Kshatriyas from the arms; the Vaishyas, or the general mass at that time, from the thighs; and the Shudras from the feet. It is the last claim – viz, the Shudras assigned to the feet – that is singular, because this means obviously that even at that early date the Shudras were held in particular contempt. Up until now, except for Brahmans and Rajanyas, given their names, there was no direct association with caste, while Vaishyas might just mean the general mass. Therefore, one would imagine that the peasants were treated as Vaishyas; at least that was the position given to them when the *Dharmashāstra* texts began to be compiled, particularly in the *Manusmriti*, *c.* AD 150. But actually, when one comes to the Later Vedic period (*c.* 800 BC), when some advance had been made into the Gangetic valley and possibly the last of the Vedas, the *Atharvaveda*, was composed, one cannot still speak of peasant communities. It is often forgotten that when plough cultivation came, there was no iron coulter to go with the plough. Therefore, stone cones had to be used. When one used stone cones, one had to have a larger wooden structure to carry the heavy stone. Such a plough would be very heavy and would require more than two bullocks – even with the Indian *zebu*, which by its hump can better carry the plough. Hymns in the *Atharvaveda* tell us that the plough was pulled by six or eight bullocks. So clearly, ploughing was necessarily monopolised by large cattle-owners. One therefore sees that in the *Rigveda*, much greater attention is given to cattle than to cultivation. And clearly, then, as one can see in its "Ploughman's Song," the ploughman is merely *sira* with his plough (*shuna*), being a labourer employed by the cattle-owner. It would seem that the ploughman was a Shudra and the owner of the cattle a Vaishya. In later writing, too, including early Buddhist literature, one often finds references to six or eight bullocks pulling the plough for the landowner.

Things changed only with the coming of iron. The archaeological evidence shows that iron came to India, to south India as well as to north, around 1000 BC or a little later. It took time, of course, for ironsmiths to learn their trade and to lighten the plough by replacing the stone slab with the iron point. Ultimately, by Mauryan times, we have

the standard peasant using a plough with an iron coulter, a light wooden structure drawn by two bullocks. And it was this particular technological development in the Iron Age, I think, that at last created the Indian peasant (ploughman and bullock-owner in one).

This raises the question of the association of the Shudra caste with the peasants. Since earlier the cattle-owners, being also plough-owners, were Vaishyas, the caste system was faced with this new situation, where the plough-owner was himself a worker with a pair of bullocks to feed. In the *Manusmriti* there is, therefore, a deprecation of the peasant's position. It is now the Buddhist *ahiṁsa* doctrine that is appropriated by the author of the *Manusmriti*, namely, that since the iron plough injures earth's creatures, ploughing is a condemnable occupation, and peasants therefore cannot belong to the "twice-born" castes (the first three castes) and so must remain Shudras. But still, since earlier texts had treated peasants, or at least plough-owners, as Vaishyas, that classification is not directly contested in the *Manusmriti*.

As Professor R. S. Sharma has shown, the tendency is now increasingly – even among the Buddhists, as one can see from Yijing's account around AD 700 – to denounce the peasants' occupation as violative of *ahiṁsa*, which justified their being counted among the Shudras.

There is a second aspect also of the change in agrarian conditions, and that is the creation of the "outcastes." With the introduction of iron and its increasing use – particularly after the arrival of the shafted iron axe – forests began to be cut down, so that for the first time there were large clearances made in the Gangetic basin, especially in Magadha and Kaushala. The process began long before the Buddha, but continuing in his time, involved a long process of subjugation and humiliation of the forest communities. The forests were not previously without human beings. They were full of what Gordon Childe called "gathering communities" – animal hunters, food gatherers, woodcutters, and those who trapped small animals, all of these constituting a large number of communities. These communities were now seen as enemies of the settled populations. As forests were cleared, they were either killed off or subjugated. Those who survived came to form the outcaste communities. If one looks at the list of such communities in the *Manusmriti*, one finds leather workers, workers in cane, fishermen, carpenters and wood workers, hunting communities, and others. About four or five communities whose names are given in the *Manusmriti* lived by hunting and killing animals. And then we have the general categories of *Chaṇḍālas*, *Shvapāchas*, etc., comprising all who were involved in what Gordon Childe called "gathering" occupations in society.

The *Manusmriti* thus shows how, as forests were cleared, these forest communities became major components of the class of *Chaṇḍālas* (outcastes). Their members became seasonal field labourers and were assigned what were regarded as the most humiliating professions, like leather work, dirt removal, and as porters – the

professions furnishing their means of survival in off-seasons. This was because in the Indian conditions, where there were two sowings and two harvests in a year, agriculture needed extra labour only at these times; there had now to be a reserve of labour for that extra work, which was provided by outcastes.

Buddhism has a particular role to play in this process, a role that is often overlooked. Despite the humanitarian vision one attributes to Buddhism and Jainism, and despite their condemnation of the Brahmans, we seldom find any direct condemnation of the caste system in their early texts. In fact, the Buddha is said to have taken pride in the strict endogamy practised by Kshatriyas. But there are two major new elements to consider at the ideological level. First of all, there was the doctrine of transmigration of souls initially put forward, not by Brahmanical sects, but by Buddhism and Jainism. We may recall that even in the Upanishads (the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, for example), the source of the doctrine of transmigration of souls is traced specifically to the Kshatriyas; and both Mahavira and Gautama Buddha, who espoused this doctrine, were Kshatriyas. When the doctrine was popularised, it immediately provided an important justification for the caste system, because one's position by birth in the caste hierarchy could now be justified by one's presumed deeds in a previous birth.

Secondly, the *ahiṁsa* doctrine, as I have already mentioned, could be used to denigrate the occupation not only of foresters but also of peasants, and thereby reduce them to the status of Shudras. One greatly admires Ashoka, and it must be said to his credit that in his *Dhaṁma*, the *varna* or caste doctrine finds no place, partly perhaps because at that time the caste system as it developed later was only established in parts of Bihar and Awadh in the Gangetic basin and not in other parts of his empire. As far as one knows, the Indus basin and the Deccan possibly did not have the *varna* system at that time. Certainly, the historical records of Alexander's invasion do not make any reference to its presence in the Indus basin, although Brahmans are mentioned. It is only Megasthenes, who visited Magadha, who offers us a description of a fairly developed caste system. But still Ashoka, otherwise so peaceable, warns the forest-folk that if they persisted in their occupations, they would be killed; they are marked as the enemy in his so-called Kalinga Edicts.

In condemning the forest-folk for killing animals, there was surely also a major economic impulse, viz., to turn them into *Chaṇḍālas* and similar outcaste communities: reduced to extreme privation, they could provide cheap agricultural labour. And it is perhaps true to say that until the last century, it was the outcastes who provided the bulk of the agricultural labour needed by the Indian peasantry. No such institution existed anywhere else in the world. When we examine the literature that Professor R. S. Sharma has explored in his *Shudras in Ancient India*, and other ancient Indian sources studied by his colleagues, as well as the medieval evidence that is so profuse, we always find that agricultural labourers belong mainly

to the outcastes, the "untouchables." This constitutes a fundamental feature of India's agrarian order of the past.

There are some other matters to consider with reference to the caste system. First, we must recognise that agrarian caste structure could never remain stable. Class relations changed, and so did the castes. I shall take here, as an instance, the history of two castes: the Rajaputras (Rajputs) and the Jats.[3]

The word "*rajaputra*" means a prince, but in the seventh and eighth centuries, when the term was first used, it meant an armed horseman. Curiously, the first dateable reference to *rajaputra* is in an Arabic text of the eighth century, now surviving in a thirteenth-century Persian translation, called the *Chachnāma*. It says that in AD 712–13, when Arab invaders encountered the army of Dāhar, the ruler of Sind, he was accompanied by 5,000 horsemen, termed, in Arabic, *ibnā al-mulūk* or "sons of rulers," the literal translation of the Sanskrit *rajaputra*. The Persian translator could not make head or tail of it, so he wisely retained the Arabic word, *ibnā-ul mulūk*.

Thereafter in Sanskrit also – for example, in the *Rājataraṅgini*, composed *c.* AD 1150 – you have *rajaputra* used for a cavalryman. But *rajaputras* were also part of the contemporary agrarian society. As cavalrymen they were assigned land, from which they collected rents or taxes. They were therefore what might be called in English "fief holders," and in that sense they were very much like the medieval knights of Western Europe. Indeed, an American scholar has called them "the knights of Indian feudalism."

Their name was in time Prakritised into *Rāut*; and *Rāutas* begin to appear also in Sanskrit inscriptions, while they were designated *Rāut* and *Rānak* in the Persian sources from around the thirteenth century onwards. As one can see from inscriptions, they are placed over peasants from whom they collect taxes; and they paid tribute to or provided military service to higher-rank holders called *Rānakas*. The Rajputs, by the twelfth century, appear to have formed the major dominant, superior class in the north Indian countryside.

After the formation of the Delhi Sultanate the Rajputs often shifted their loyalties from the local rulers to the Sultans. They remained the major intermediaries, often being called *Rānaks* and then *Rānas* or *Rauts* in our Persian sources. But from the fourteenth century, particularly the latter half of it, they also received the designation of *chaudhuri*, as Ibn Battuta noted in the 1330s or early 1340s. In 1351, we first encounter in our documents the word zamindar, "land-holder," for the

[3] Incidentally, the University Grants Commission in India today seems to be so greatly interested in the "origins" of the Rajputs, that it is set as a particular topic to be studied in the BA History course, though we have no similar theme about the origins of outcastes or the origins of Shudras! But it is very likely that the origins of the Rajaputras were as far away as possible from both the claimed descent from the sun and the moon, as also the now proposed origin as high-born men taking to arms to save national honour, threatened by Muslims.

major intermediaries, who were naturally now mostly Rajputs by caste. In the great Mughal record of zamindars, locality-wise, contained in Abū'l Fāẓl's *Āīn-i-Akbarī*, 1595, we have a whole list of Rajput clans in different localities under the designation of zamindars. So at least in northern India, as well as in parts of the Deccan, the Rajputs remained a major element of the zamindar class. They had clans, they had marriage customs of their own, and they had now developed into a full-blown *jati*. It would be interesting to speculate how the political stability that the Mughal empire provided for such a long period helped to consolidate the position of the Rajput zamindars in the countryside.

The other community whose origins are interesting is today a typically peasant caste, namely, that of the Jats or Jaṭṭs. Without this name, they are described by the famous Chinese traveller Xuanzuang, in the 640s, as a numerous community of poor pastoralists in Sind who claimed to be Buddhists. They are also described in the early eighth century by the *Chachnāma*, but under the name "Jat." We are told they claimed to be *Samanīs* (*Śramanas*), i.e., Buddhist monks, and were pastoralists, not peasants, and who were regarded by all others as outcastes. According to Balāzurī, the Arab historian, when in Sind the Jats came into a town, they had to be accompanied by dogs so that others might be warned to keep away from them. But in the eleventh century, Jats are classed as Shudras by Alberuni, and thus no longer as outcastes; and they appear to be a caste already important in the Multan (southern Punjab) region. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Jats appear as a major peasant caste in the Punjab, being described in *Dabistan* (*c.* 1655) as low-ranking Vaishyas. So they had risen further in stature. In Punjabi, in fact, *Jat* often came to mean simply a peasant. Thus, in the Jats of Punjab, and the Jats of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh who speak a Hindustani dialect, we have a remarkable evolution of a community climbing the caste ladder: from an outcaste seeking to be "Sanskritised" by first becoming Buddhists, and then from pastoralists turning into peasants, and in that position rising over time in the caste scale. But many among them did not give up their older practices such as widow remarriage and readiness to handle the plough, which were the marks in the medieval caste system of Shudras rather than Vaishyas. Jats in Haryana and the *Doab*belt became very important elements of the population in late Mughal times because of the rebellion their chiefs raised, thereby giving them dominance over other peasants.

We can see in the case of both the Rajputs and the Jaṭṭs (Jats) that individual castes or communities could change their position and functions, while the main social structure remained unaltered. Thus, as the cavalryman became in medieval times (*c.* 700 onwards) the decisive arm of military power, the *rajaputras* (*Rāutas*, Rajputs) came to form the dominant land-controlling castes in northern India. On the other hand, the Jatts, originally an "untouchable" pastoral community, evolved into a major peasant caste of northwestern India, claiming Vaishya status for themselves. In both cases, the caste composition of the agrarian classes changed over time, but the agrarian order and class structure remained largely unchanged.

I would now like to present a case of how unity could still come out of diversity, drawing upon the case of right-hand and left-hand castes in south India. These two caste groups appear in south India rather late, perhaps in Late Chola times. Subsequently, in the Vijayanagara empire, the two caste divisions were at each other's throats most of the time. They often rioted. During the days of the Vijayanagara empire, whose ruling dynasty and nobles were Telugu-speaking, the Tamil peasantry also came under considerable degree of repression, that empire being seen as a kind of external power in the Tamil country. In Thanjavur district a remarkable incident occurred in 1429, when all the left-hand and right-hand castes yet came together as peasants. They had also representatives of merchant *jatis*, craftsmen *jatis*, and others among them, each profession sometimes represented by three or four castes, left-hand and right-hand together. They decided in that assemblage that they would not pay the increased revenue and land taxes, and other burdens imposed on them by the new Vijayanagara administration. Even the outcaste *parayar* (from whose name the word "pariah" comes) were included here. The allied castes declared that they would pay taxes at particular rates, and would not accept other impositions. Apparently, the Vijayanagara administration was forced to agree to their demands. Indeed, the peasants installed an inscription proclaiming that these rates would not be allowed to be increased. This was a particularly important and indeed unique event, in which so many castes came together forgetting their various differences, forcing the administration to accept their demands. Even if later on they got divided, even if later on the administration forgot what it had promised, it does seem to mark a remarkable event in India's caste history, a unique use of the caste apparatus for peasant mass action.

The caste system being an exclusively Indian institution, no sanction for it could be found in Muslim law. Yet, in practice, the Delhi Sultanate accepted the caste system as a normal social institution. I have not seen any criticism of the caste system by any Muslim theologian or even an ordinary Muslim writer of medieval times. Nor does even a liberal writer like Abū'l Fāẓl, who described the caste system in such detail in the *Ā'īn-i-Akbarī* (*c.* 1595), find any fault or source of harm in it. Clearly, caste divisions were as useful for the Sultans as for their predecessors. The *balāhar*, the landless labourer, is mentioned in the description of 'Alauddin Khalji's agrarian measures (also called *dhānak*, and by other names in other areas). It was important to keep the *balāhar* in his place so that the existing system could continue, and peasants could get landless labourers to help them at sowing and harvesting times at the lowest possible wages.

From the Mughal times, we have far greater detail about rural castes. I have just mentioned the *Ā'īn-i-Akbarī*'s record of the zamindar castes, locality-wise. But in the documents, particularly the land demarcation documents called *chaknamas*, one can always also detect the presence of outcastes. They were allowed little pieces of land, often not even separately recorded as individual holdings, though otherwise a *chaknama* usually records the names of individual peasant-holders. When its writer

came to cultivation by *chamars* (tanners), he would just record "*chamrahat*," as in the Braj area, not caring to record the names of individual *chamars*. But we do find *chamars* owning small pieces of land that they could even sell. The agrarian structure was maintained by the Sultanate and Mughal administrations more or less as they found it. It was very important for them to keep it that way for their own land revenue extraction. If the peasants had to get extra labour at the right time, some land had to be assigned to the outcastes for their bare subsistence. Therefore, as far as agrarian conditions were concerned, apart from perhaps the imposition of the cash nexus and regular land revenue systems that were now established over large areas, the caste structure remained unimpaired. It is possible that its harsher features were a little softened, because there is no evidence that the Mughal administration itself imposed or supported the imposition of any caste restrictions. The caste system seems to be just ignored in the detailed Mughal decrees.

It is otherwise, however, with Mughal official statistics. The great *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* (*c.* 1595) provides us with rich data on local zamindar castes by recording these against individual sub-districts. For some regions, we have local data on castes by villages. We observe in the latter case the simultaneous existence of many single-caste villages alongside multi-caste villages. There were, for instance, in Rajasthan, where we have very good data for Marwar in the seventeenth century, large areas where a single caste of peasants dominated the countryside along with the outcastes to supply them with labour. There were also multi-caste villages among them. Such a diverse pattern meant that internal village arrangements could vary greatly. As far as we can see from documents, the *panchayats* or the dominant village groups each usually belonged to just one caste. What happened in multi-caste villages is not clear: no multi-caste *panchayat* has been documented as yet.

There was another burden that the outcastes had to bear: namely, the liability to forced (usually unremunerated) labour, called *begār*. Despite being formally prohibited by the Mughal administration from Akbar's time onwards, it was in practice everywhere imposed on the oppressed castes by the powerful. We learn from Mughal official reports of 1678 relating to Rajasthan that Rajputs felt entitled to force Thorīs, an outcaste, to convey their baggage by *begār* from village to village. On the other hand, according to an official report, when in 1678 in Ajmer province, a Gūjar belonging to a supposedly "lower" (but not an "untouchable") caste refused to render *begār* sought to be forced on him by some Rajputs, he was simply killed by the latter for his act of defiance. Apparently, no one was punished – as is usually the case with mass lynching in India today.

Within the Muslim peasantry, too, there developed a parallel system of outcastes. For instance, in Western Punjab, where there are Muslim villages, there are also communities called *kamin*; they are Muslims, but landless and backward. A Japanese scholar who had written a book on agrarian conditions in Punjab (Pakistan) told me that though he could not write this in his book, the *kamins*

complained to him that while their "brothers" in India were getting reservations in posts and land allotments, they did not get these in Pakistan. So even within the Muslim peasantry, there was the development of an underclass very much modelled after the outcastes. Such a depressed community could be seen in some Pathan villages on the North West Frontier as well.

The caste system thus encountered no particular hostility or opposition from Muslim rulers (and theologians) during the medieval period, though of course money always mattered. This is well brought out in a verse of Kabir, who as we know was an opponent of untouchability. But he also knew that money could always sweep away constraints even of caste:

> Let a Shākit or Brahman refuse to meet a Chandāl; a Vaishnav would do so
> And if you give him a petty coin, it would be as if you have met Gopāl (God).

Kabir sings, however, of a rare case. Where would the indigent Chandāl have money to draw the favour of a Vaishnavite! The real role of money could lie in altering or modifying the caste pattern of land-ownership of "higher" castes. We must remember that by Akbar's reign (1556–1605) the heavy land-tax was being levied in money, which implied the existence of a widespread money economy. Numerous sale-deeds of land by both zamindars or superior land-owners and peasants from various localities have survived. There was apparently no constraint on such transactions whatever the castes of sellers and buyers. Generally speaking, upper-caste men and Muslims dominate the ranks of buyers in the numerous documented cases from all parts of the Mughal empire. But while interesting in itself as showing that there was no legal protection extended to caste-holdings, it is doubtful if these money transactions substantially altered the larger picture. We are fortunate that Abū'l Fāẓl in his *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, an official description of Akbar's empire and administration, provides a detailed listing of zamindar castes and clans under every locality (*pargana*). In most cases, we can see that the same castes or clans continued to dominate land-ownership in the respective areas during British times as well. No substantive change in the caste pattern of land-ownership seems to have taken place despite all our evidence of land sales.

And so, I think I will end here, with the end of the Mughal period. The caste system is still with us. It may change its form, but that is a modern story.

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