

Migration and the Disappearance of Caste among Indian South Africans

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The History of the Indian community in South Africa, as with other immigrant communities, is a relatively recent one. The first immigrants arrived on board the S.S. Truro in Durban, in November 1860. These women, men and children were recruited mainly from the South India, to work as indentured labourers in the sugar fields and in other enterprises in Natal; the local black population being apparently unwilling to do so. This paper is only concerned with the descendants of the largely South Indian indentured labour force, and not with so-called 'passenger' Indians who paid their own way, came mainly from North and West India, and were Muslim as well as Hindu.

The religion of the majority of the indentured was Hinduism, of a small minority Christianity. The Hinduism which the indentured brought with them, however, was circumscribed by their position as indentured servants in a new world, one which lacked the familiar patterns of authority and social relationships of the old. While it is difficult to generalise about Indian society because it is so varied and diverse, many Indologists and anthropologists writings on India (e.g. Dube 1955; Srinivas 1965, Karve 1965; Fuller 1988; Biardeau 1989), accept the view of Louis Dumont (1966:43) that underneath the many social forms and cultural expressions, most social relations and values in India are connected to a pattern of hierarchy which constitutes the basis of the caste system, (but see Appadurai 1986, for a contrary view).

Dumont credits the French sociologist Celestin Bougle, with describing the caste system as composed of hereditary groups which are both distinguished from one another and connected in three ways: firstly by gradation of status and hierarchy; secondly, by detailed rules aimed at ensuring their separation and thirdly, by the division of labour and the interdependence resulting from it. According to Dumont these principles are reducible to one fundamental one 'namely the opposition between pure and impure'. This opposition underlies hierarchy, separation and the division of labour. This preoccupation with pure and impure, is, says Dumont (1966:43), 'a constant in Hindu life'. Biardeau (1989:13) notes that

the opposition high:low, pure:impure, which is essential to this hierarchial vision of society, has to be conceived above all as a close complementary, even when it implies separations in space Each person knows the other and where he belongs: the patron and his clientele, the King and his subjects, the household priest and the families he serves, are bound together in a 'face to face' relationship.

This opposition is shown in macroscopic form in the contrast between two extreme categories: Brahmins and Untouchables. Brahmins, in principle priests, are superior in rank to all other castes; the untouchables, as impure servants are segregated outside the villages in their own dwellings. They are subject to numerous prohibitions, for instance they may not use the water from the same wells as other castes and they are not allowed access to caste Hindu temples. Although hygiene is invoked to justify ideas of impurity, the notion of caste is, according to Dumont, fundamentally a religious one, whose source lies in the temporary impurity contracted by clean caste members in relation to organic life. It is therefore specialisation in impure tasks which leads to this attribution of permanent impurity to some categories of people. However, Deliege (1992:169) notes that at least in South India, 'impurity cannot be separated from powerlessness and servitude'. Temporary and permanent impurity shares the same nature. Temporary impurity is often associated with life cycle rituals; especially those connected with birth and death. While birth only affects the mother and child, death affects the relations of the dead person collectively as it is both a social and a physical matter. Thus impurity corresponds to the organic aspect of man, and religion, by prescribing impurity, sets up an opposition between religious and social man, on the one hand, and nature on the other.

The history of the opposition between pure and impure in India is a long one, dating back at least to the laws of Manu (c. 300BCE) where the restrictions on Untouchables are clearly recorded, along with those relating to women, dogs and pigs. According to Dumont the development of caste historically must have been accompanied by the development of Brahmanic prescriptions relating to the impurities of organic life. The impurity of the untouchables is inseparable from the purity of the Brahmin. Thus untouchability cannot truly disappear until the purity of the Brahmin is radically devalued (Dumont 1966:53). The development of the opposition between pure and impure can be seen in the Hindu attitude towards the cow. Although the cow was revered at the time of the Vedas, these animals were also eaten from time to time as a sacrifice. Later the murder of a cow became equated with that of a Brahmin, and, since untouchables had the work of disposing of dead cows and their skins, this labour became one of them and features of Untouchability. The cow, half-animal, half-divine counterpart of Brahman, effectively divides the

highest from the lowest of men. Its sacred character thus has a social function. The maintenance of purity in this way entails the existence of specialists in impurity. Thus, especially in South India, the presence of Untouchables in village ceremonies is considered essential, as musicians and even as priests. Therefore Indian society may be conceived of as a totality made up of two unequal but complementary parts.

Connected to the concept of hierarchy is the basic fact that India is a group based and not an individual based society. Most of the actions and behaviour which an Indian undertakes is in relation to the various groups to which he belongs and most of this he is born into. Cohn (1971) suggests that these groups can be seen as the layers of an onion. At the centre of the onion is the family and this includes a man's parents, his siblings and his own wife and children. Such families are linked together genealogically to other families who also live close by. These families may hold land in common and have ritual obligations to one another. A number of such families form a lineage, that is, a group of males generally who recognise descent from a common ancestor.

Usually separate from, but occasionally coterminous with the lineage is the local caste group often referred to as *jati*, *jati* may be used to refer to a sub-caste, caste or caste category but most often to refer an endogamous large-scale descent group. Each man in the local caste group considers other men of his age to be his brothers, the women his sisters. Older men are thought of as a man's father and older women in the same way as a mother. A man uses kin terms to address these people. A local caste group may have a head who can act on behalf of its members in relations with other caste groups. It may own land or other property jointly, such as ritual objects. There may also be a local caste council which can exercise social control over the members (Beteille 1971). Hutton (1946:97) remarks that

from the point of view of the individual member of a caste the system provides him with a fixed milieu from which neither wealth nor poverty, success nor disaster, can remove him/ He is provided in this way with a permanent body of associations which control almost all his behaviour and contacts. His caste canalizes his choice in marriage, acts as his trade union, his friendly or benefit society. It takes the place for him of health insurance, and if need be provides for his funeral.

Foucault notes (1980:119) that what makes power hold good,

what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says 'no' but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge and produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

He comments that power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation and not only do individuals circulate between its threads, they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application.

It is probably significant of the true origins of the caste system that the ultimate controlling authority in the past was secular and that in the ancient Hindu scriptures was perceived to be the king. Thus cases of transgression of caste rules which could not be settled by the caste councils were referred to the state courts or to the ruler himself. The Rajput princes of the Kangra hills classified Brahmins, promoted from one caste to another, and readmitted expelled persons to caste, partially at least for monetary payments (Hutton 1946:81). Local rule, under the Moghuls and the British in India was in the hands of dominant castes and local caste councils. Dominance and rule were highly fragmented and prohibition on marriage across caste lines effectively insulated one dominant caste from another. The power of the dominant caste in a village or district was supported by the norm discouraging villagers from seeking justice from government officials, courts or police outside the village. Where a dominant caste has sufficient numbers it has usually been able to occupy a number of positions on the village council or panchayat. Pandian suggests that it is the corporateness of village life with everyone in the village subordinate to the adjudicative and penalising power of the village and caste which is a significant part of the authority structure which every villager comprehends. Inter and intra-caste mechanisms of social control depend on the villager accepting the authority of group action, which is represented in the panchayat or council of elders (Pandian 1983:196).

Foucault (1980:100) suggests that one needs to investigate historically and beginning at the lowest level how mechanisms of power have been able to function ...

the manner in which, at the effective level of the family, of the immediate environment, of the cells and most basic units of society, these phenomena of repression and exclusion possessed their instruments and logic, in response to a certain number of needs.

One of the most important of these mechanisms of power was the caste or village council, but it could only act for a limited area, small enough for the members of the council to assemble and for members of the caste within the area to have some knowledge of each other as a general rule.

Generally, the lower the caste in the social scale, the stronger its combination and the more efficient its organisation. Caste councils penalised people who broke rules of eating or fraternising with lower castes or who performed menial

work or changed their caste names. Transgressors who refused to recant or pay the fines were outcasted. This meant that members of the *jati* of the offender refused to have any social intercourse with him. Traditionally the punishments included withdrawing the right to receive water and *kachcha* or pure food from fellow caste members—the equivalents of the Roman *interdictio aquae et ignis*. Hutton (1946:90) comments that the ‘culprit is for practical purposes excommunicated’, and cites an example of some high caste subjects of a feudal prince in Orissa who refused to accept the decision of their ruler in a caste case and were themselves outcasted by him in consequence.

No priest, barber or washerman could render them any service, with the result that they had long beards matted with dirt, their hair hung in long strands and was filthy in the extreme, and their clothes were beyond description for uncleanness (Hutton 1946:83).

Excommunication may be a temporary penalty or for life.

Other forms of punishment are fines or the provision of feasts for the caste, or to Brahmins, or corporal punishment, or the performance of a pilgrimage, and many penalties were intended to humiliate the culprit, much as the stocks were used in mediaeval Europe. Caste control in India was least among the higher and better educated classes who are less tied to a particular locality by family ties. Persons of influence can thus often bend the rules and carry it off. The more territorially concentrated a caste is the greater will be its consciousness of itself as a coherent entity and the more stringent is its control likely to be over the individual members. High castes rarely have any organisation strictly comparable to the lower ones. They may have a *sabha*, an association, but a *panchayat* and officials are rare. Rules of caste among high castes are maintained by the force of public opinion and the feeling of caste members. Informal ostracism may be applied by some members and not by others. For instance, Gandhi was excommunicated by leaders of his caste in Bombay following his first visit to England in 1924 but caste members at his home at *Rajkot* took no notice.

From the point of view of caste relationships in daily life, only the local caste group of *jati* has meaning for the individual. Mandelbaum (1968:39) comments:

a villager typically identifies with his *jati* so closely because so much of his social world is encompassed within it and therefore his idea of who he is cannot be separated from what his *jati* is. He is continually identified by others as part of his *jati*. *Jati* is thus a leading reference category in village life.

The local caste group exists within the ideological categories of the four *varnas*, (*varna* being a Sanskrit word meaning colour); these comprise Brahmins (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (traders) and *Sudras* (workers). Most *jatis*, especially in South India, fall into the *Sudra* category and very few belong to the select first two whose members call themselves the 'twice born'. Untouchables (or *Adi-dravidas* meaning indigenous people, a term used in South India) are left out of the system altogether. In terms of determining one's caste membership only the local caste groups and the *jati* are important, because they are groups, that is they have a concrete reality and a known membership or structure. *Varna* membership is important when a group tries to change its status, although other castes may know it is *Vaishya* or *Sudra*. It is difficult for an individual to survive in India without relatives, even in migrating from village to city it would be unusual for an individual to go alone. While educated Untouchables may appear to be members of higher castes or may claim to be so for temporary benefits, the need to marriage partners and kin as a resource group discourages permanent passing (Kolenda 1978:105). Barrington Moore (1966), writing of the heyday of British India in the 1940s, commented that caste remained tremendously persistent and flexible, a huge mass of locally co-ordinated social cells that tolerated novelty by generating another cell.

Typical of the distinctions between different *varna* can be found in the account by Andre Beteille of Sripuram, a village in Tamilnad, South India. In this village the major cleavages are between Brahmin landowners and non-Brahmin *Sudras* and Untouchables. While Brahmins have different skin colour and features to others, they also, according to Beteille, appear more 'refined' and 'cultivated'. He comments that

the real physical differences of the Brahmins and the popular belief that they constitute a different race have led to their being isolated to a much greater extent in Tamilnad and South India as a whole than in the rest of India (Beteille 1971:49).

In Tanjore, particularly, Sanskrit has been a major influence on the Brahmins, enriching thought and giving their speech a particular character. Non-Brahmins specialised in Tamil studies and literacy did not extend to Untouchables. Familiarity with Sanskrit is regarded as a sign of refinement and a high social value is placed on it. The pursuit of learning and attendance to the spiritual needs of the people were often combined with ownership of land by Brahmins. Although this has changed in recent years to include occupations such as school teaching and clerical work, no Brahmin has adopted manual work.

Manual labour, on the other hand, has played a large part in the lives of *Sudras* and more especially on untouchables, whose work in general has been of a

non-specialised and unskilled kind. Deliege notes that all over India, *Harijans* provide a labour force which may be drawn on at will. This rural proletariat only owns its own labour power to make a living and therefore exists in a permanent state of economic dependence (Deliege 1992:171). Although the Hindu scriptures emphasise that the harmonious working of the social system is dependent on co-operation between castes, most Brahmins have little to do in the religious sphere with non-Brahmins and untouchables. Except for a few families of temple priests, Brahmins do not today and did not in the past offer services to lower castes in Sripuram. Although Brahmins have been instrumental in keeping alive the 'great tradition' in India through their Sanskritic scholarship which provides an overarching basis for unity among Hindus, they have not entered into social relations with Sudras or untouchables in the ritual or ceremonial sphere. Sanskritic elements are often reformed by villagers so that they become part of a local cult. For instance, the great goddesses of the Hindu pantheon often become transformed into local deities with their own festivals and rituals. These innumerable local deities of village origin are important to ordinary villagers and it was these local gods and goddesses whose worship formed much of the folk religion brought with the indentured to South Africa. Fuller (1988), in an important article maintains that the village deities can legitimately be seen as symbols of caste structure, wherein the high castes are always in a complementary hierarchical relationship with the low castes (Fuller 1988:33).

While the sort of folk belief common to village India was brought to South Africa with the indentured, nevertheless the enforced move away from their rural homes did radically alter the lives of those Indians who came to Natal. Patterns of hierarchy, of purity and impurity, of caste distinctions and group belonging could not easily be maintained in an alien and often hostile environment. The presence of the Brahmin, the linchpin of Indian society, was missing in the new world of the indentured. Those indentured who arrived in Natal were forced to rebuild their lives without most of the familiar institutions which surrounded them in India. While Hinduism remained the religion of the majority, it lacked the sanskritic validation of the ancient Indian traditions and consisted mainly of those elements of village ritual remembered and fostered by the indentured.

There are two ports of embarkation for indentured labourers in India, Calcutta and Madras. Most of those who went to the West Indies and Fiji embarked at Calcutta and came from North India, while Madras supplied the majority of the indentured for South Africa. The protector of Indian Immigrants at Madras reported that the main flow of recruits came from the overpopulated Tamil districts where the landless labourer was at a hopeless disadvantage. A majority of these people were from low castes or were untouchables. Although the latter numbered a fifth of the total population of Tamilnad, in certain districts, such as Tanjore, they formed up to 27% of the population. The majority of the Madras recruits came from Tanjore,

Trichinipoly and South Arcot with another flow coming from the Telegu speaking areas to the north.

Beteille (1971) comments that the majority of people engaged in agricultural work in the district he studied in Tanjore, South India, were non-owners of land. They could be divided into two classes—tenants and agricultural labourers. Security of tenure was always a problem for lessees. Although traditionally tenants might inherit their tenancies from their fathers, landlords could also evict tenants for non-payment of dues and other reasons. Agricultural labourers differed from tenants or lessees mainly because they lacked security of employment. While the tenant had work for at least a season through his lease, the labourer had to seek work from day to day. Untouchables were not wanted as tenants in the traditional system because they rarely saved and had little moveable property and were thus bad risks as far as landlords were concerned. These landless labourers were thus the first to be affected by famine and drought such as was widespread in southern India in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Although some of the indentured hoped to go back to their homes in India after making some money in Natal; others, especially those from higher caste families, knew that their indenture would break caste prohibitions and that they would become outcasts to their families at home. Kuper says that the economic motive alone is seldom enough to explain why the immigrants left home. Family ties and tensions were also involved and these explain why, for instance, one of a number of brothers would immigrate and why some returned and others did not (Kuper 1960:217-235). Among the case histories cited by Kuper is that of S. Govender, a Tamil pensioner.

I was an orphan. After my parents died I and my two sisters went to a relation, but he was also poor. His wife was not like a mother. Then came drought and we were all hungry. Another boy and I went one day to Velapuram where we met the recruiter who promised us a lot of money. After five years I reindentured. There was no one to go back to. I had no replies to the letters I sent home.

Such stories were typical of indentured Tamil men but the recruiting agents found it far harder to persuade women to emigrate, and, since women were expected to work in the fields with the men, those with young children were discouraged. Freund (1991:419) notes that had the employers of indentured labour had their way, they would have brought to South Africa only healthy, working males but the Indian government insisted on a proportion of women to men in each boatload of at least thirty five women to every hundred men, which was, of course, hopelessly inadequate. Of the women who did indenture, some were young widows, condemned to a life of subjection to their in-laws in India with no hope of remarriage, others were women escaping from an unhappy marriage and a few had illegitimate children or had been deserted by their husbands. Because far fewer women emigrated than

men, however, they were in great demand. Serial marriage or concubine type relationships were the norm in the early days on the estates when men were unwilling to legitimise relationships with women whose origins they were unsure of. At first, then, marriage in any conventional sense was unusual among the indentured and certainly it was impossible to emulate the pattern of marriage along caste lines as in India.

Beall (1990:166) notes that for many Indian women, marriage was not an option, especially for widows and for those who had been passed around the barracks from man to man and who bore the scars, both physical and psychological, of that experience.

One of the factors which militated against the indentured returning to India was the type of emigration and whether the emigrants left India as individuals or in groups. To a great extent the indentured left as individuals or with a relative or friend, but more often with strangers. Some of these people became friends on the long voyage and were known as 'boat brothers'. Boat brothers might be from the same district in India or even from the same village but what was important was that these relationships cut across caste barriers, although they did not include intermarriage at this stage. Boat brothers shared the same barracks room on the estate, kept one another company and looked after one another when ill (Kuper, 1960).

Perhaps the most important factor to affect individual indentured immigrants was that caste restrictions did not often survive intact the journey from India. Firstly, high caste immigrants lost caste merely by crossing the ocean (although, as we have seen there were those, like Gandhi, who were able to ignore such taboos). Secondly, life on the ships was inconsistent with caste rules. People could not be rigidly separated in the holds and once having lost caste status by coming on board the ship, they were less inclined to stick to rigid rules of diet. Mayer recounts the possibly mythical account of one old woman of her ship setting forth from Calcutta bound for the sugar estates of Fiji, with each caste cooking food at a separate hearth. Suddenly a wave rocked the boat, the pots fell over and the food was mixed. The passengers had the choice of going hungry or of eating the polluted food and they chose to eat. After that, food restrictions ended (Mayer 1973:158). While the old woman's story may have been a way of rationalising the end of dietary restrictions, Mayer records that none of his informants could remember any attempt to reintroduce restrictions of food or drink in Fiji.

In South Africa there was little organised effort to segregate untouchables; although one informant did say that untouchables would have been seated and fed separately at weddings in the past (if their caste status had been known), and the wife of a high caste man of North Indian origin said that her husband would not accept food or drink from members of lower castes. Thus altogether immigration destroyed

one of the main props of the caste system, the maintenance of purity through diet and touch, caste practices survived in the form of personally recognised customs among individuals and families according to different circumstances and inclinations. Van der Burg and Van der Veer (1986:516) note that the key notion 'purity' underlying both society and religion (in India) has become a mere sentiment in Surnames Hinduism, colouring but not determining religious practices and discourses.

Occupation was another upholder of both caste separateness and caste rank. In India, occupations were graded on a scale of relative purity, which also involved indices of caste rank. At the same time, the fact that occupations were exclusive to members of certain castes was a jealously guarded right. Occupations such as barber and priest were interdependent and the only occupation which could be followed by members of any caste without incurring pollution was agriculture. Although work on the estates was not in itself polluting, it destroyed status differentiation based on caste occupation and the economic dependence of one caste on another.

Smith and Jayawardena note for Guyana (1967:51) (and the same is true for Natal), that the division of labour in the sugar estates was based on economic and technological practices which belonged to a culture quite foreign to that in which caste was embedded.

It was administered by managers who were not concerned with the preservation of traditional Indian ways. The assignment of immigrants to jobs in factory and field bore no relation to caste statuses, taboos or specialisations. Men of different castes performed the same jobs, worked in the same gangs and were paid at the same rates. Consumer goods were purchased at the estate store and there was no place for *jajman* relations.

The political system of the estate bore no relation to the caste system since decisions were made by European managers and executed by European overseers. These decisions had to be obeyed by all labourers, regardless of caste, and management officials presided over estate courts where social policies were laid down and enforced and disputes settled. Workers were not allowed to form associations to regulate any important matters regarding their economic or political interests. The estate managers were interested in maintaining an orderly and disciplined work force and to this end sought to control all aspects of social life in their domain.

The caste system received no support from the structure of authority in the estate. Managers dispensed rewards, favours and privileges in accordance with work, loyalty and obedience, irrespective of caste. They had little sympathy for, and enough authority to destroy, a parallel hierarchy of power and prestige which could interfere with their freedom to deploy the labour force. Authority based on caste had little prospect of persisting outside the labour sphere since managers could, and did, intervene in any matter which directly or indirectly affected discipline.

After the immigrants had fulfilled their terms of indenture and moved from the estates, the old pattern as known in India, did not return. Firstly, there was no need for many of the old occupations in the new country. Metal pots replaced the clay ones made by the potter in India and most small farmers did their own repairs, mended their own houses and so forth. Few Indians living in towns or villages in Natal carried on specialist work, and those who did, did not necessarily belong to the appropriate caste. One exception was that Hindi speaking priests remained Brahmins, although not all men of the Brahmin caste became priests. At one wedding of a high caste Hindi girl which I attended, the young Brahmin priest who came from a nearby town to officiate, was training to become a teacher and said that his father had not been a priest, but his grandfather had been one. He said he hoped to study further in India. Among Tamil speakers and other south Indians no hereditary caste of priests arrived with the indentured and informants stated that anyone with the necessary inclination and training could become a priest.

Another feature of the caste system which was changed by emigration was that traditionally one's caste membership was ascriptive; that is, it was inherited at birth and could not be changed. However, indentured immigrants could, and did, change their caste names as individuals. A false caste name could be given to the recruiter, and, once landed, individuals were under no obligation to furnish more than one name. Although fellow workers usually ferreted out approximate caste status (through eating habits, dress and such like indicators), some individuals did change their caste affiliations in a way which would not have been possible in the village setting of India. Many of the caste names adopted in South Africa are actually caste titles but, as Pandian (1983:191) notes, 'titles have the potential of become caste names and an individual may use one or more caste labels to denote his caste identity.' Caste status then became something flexible in Natal and only important generally on the level of varna (or caste category) when marriage was being considered (Kuper 1960: 26).

Conclusion

In terms of this analysis, caste could not survive as a system in Natal Indian society, although some elements may influence behaviour. The pure-impure hierarchy does not differentiate social groups but individuals and refers only to temporary states (such as childbirth) to which everyone is subject and from which everyone can be released. The factor which caused the particular elements of the caste system to dissolve were mainly caused by a lack of any connection of the system to the sources of power in Natal society. Caste members could not form on-going social groups on the estates because no-one had the power to organise them. Again, in the towns no person or group could exercise control over others. Caste values and rules were

reduced to unenforceable moral scruples. Only within the domestic sphere did various beliefs and practices persist at times. All legitimate power was in the hands of government and estate administration. In the rare cases when *panchayats* or village councils were recreated they became subordinate to a local Health Board and had no legal power to enforce or counter the laws enacted by the bureaucratic government.

As Vertovec (1990:227) notes, religious components of ethnic ideology, though in essence considered by believers to be 'ahistorical', are (not) necessarily frozen or fixed in form; these, like secular features, are part of a wider milieu, and may undergo modification in response to contextual changes. Among those Indians who paid their own way to South Africa and entered business or the professions, caste consciousness rather than structure persisted, largely because they had greater economic security, brought their families with them from India and often retained contact with caste members in their home villages in Gujarat and elsewhere in north India. In time, religion and language differences became broader and more clearly recognisable divisions among Indians in South Africa than caste or varna. The ultimate sanction of caste rules is outcasting and in South Africa no caste organisation had power to impose this drastic punishment. While a family might ostracise a member it cannot excommunicate him or her. Power, then, is the crucial variable in the disappearance of caste in its original form in Natal.

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