

HINDU CASTE IN A REGAL TRADITION: THE NATIVE VIEW

by *Pauline Kolenda*

Edward Norbeck criticized Max Gluckman's interpretation of certain rituals involving the reversal of sex roles among peoples of southeastern Africa. He pointed out that in Gluckman's treatment, "We are rarely told what they (the rites) mean to the native peoples" (Norbeck 1963:1260). "Although Gluckman seems well aware of the importance of these data, his interpretation of rituals of rebellion proceeds without regard to native attitudes toward the ceremonies" (Norbeck 1963:1271).

In this paper, I would like to look briefly at caste in Khalapur village in western Uttar Pradesh, in northern India, to see what caste relationships "mean to the native peoples." The data I shall draw upon were collected between 1954 and 1956, when I did field work in this huge (about 5,000 population) Rājput-dominated village, as part of a Cornell University inter-disciplinary team. Particularly, I draw on conversations with three Rājput elders, a Bāniyā shopkeeper, and two Untouchable Chamārs. I look back at the villagers' statements through Dumontian glasses—influenced by the views of Louis Dumont, whose book *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) represents a recent major contribution to the understanding of the Hindu caste system.

Dumont's portrayal of the Hindu caste system is sometimes characterized as one seen from a Brahmannical perspective (Berreman 1971a, 1971b). His emphasis upon the centrality of a religious hierarchy with the Brahman priest at the apex, a ritual representative of all before the gods, who thus must be kept pure in his person; upon the social precedence, therefore, of the Brahman's religious duty over the Ruler's pursuit of wealth and power; upon the ranking and closure of caste social units by principles of purity-impurity; yet upon the interdependence of caste specialties, because the low must do impure work,

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so that the high may be kept pure—all these features of Dumont's treatment suggest a Brahmannical bias.

Dumont suggests that field anthropologists who have emphasized the political and economic power relationships between high caste and low caste may, indeed, be reporting the *material* relationships between the castes correctly, but the *ideology* of Hindus is not stated in terms of haves and have-nots. It rather emphasizes the separation of the religious from the political and economic. Politico-economic power relationships may be found operating, but they are not part of the Hindu ideology, Dumont says, an ideology which is essentially religious (Dumont 1970:65-75).

In my own analysis of *Homo Hierarchicus*, I suggested that Dumont appears to have drawn on a rather narrow corpus of texts to find his interpretation—passages in the *Pañcaviṃṣa Brāhmāna* and the *Laws of Manu*. I also pointed out that there was a martial tradition in ancient India that might be considered the ideology of the Ruler and Warrior (Kolenda 1976:585, 595). After Dumont, other anthropologists also have suggested that there may be varying models of the elite, Kingly as well as Brahmannical (Beck 1972, Barnett 1970). Marriott has suggested that there may be four models, one for each of the four *varnas* (broad social categories). In this paper, I wish to make a brief exploration of a Kingly ideology of caste, the set of terms and ideas that explain, justify, and make possible discourse about the local caste system.

In a footnote Hitchcock said that the complete title of his writing should have been "The Martial and Regal Rajput" (Hitchcock 1958:223), and here I also stress the regal.

I. THE SONS OF KINGS IN KHALAPUR

The Rajputs of Khalapur affect long mustaches, wear high turbans, and carry *lathis*, heavy wire-bound staffs. They claim to be descended from the epic hero, Ram, and from the last great Hindu king of Delhi, Prithvi Raj (A.D. 1190). Hitchcock said:

Largely because of this stress upon the blood relationship between themselves and the kings and heroes of the past, one of the most basic attributes of the martial Rājput is the strongly held belief that he, himself, at least by tradition and innate capacity, is a warrior and ruler. . . . The martial Rājput, for example, regards it as his duty to see that the proper social relationships between all castes are maintained, and that the hierarchical order of society is preserved. As a prerogative of his status, he expects both deference and obedience from members of the lower castes. He also feels that only Rājputs have qualities which make competent rulers, and regards other groups who do not share this heritage as fundamentally incompetent to meet the demands of such a rule. When I asked an elderly Rājput whether he thought Pandit Neh-

ru was a good ruler, he snuffed with disdain. "He is a Brahman," he said. (Hitchcock 1958:217)

In a further reference to the relationship between Rājput̄s and the lower castes, he says, "he considers it to be a part of his duty as guardian of the social order to strike a member of the lower castes in order to teach him what to do" (Hitchcock 1958:219).

The passage quoted from Hitchcock's essay is reminiscent of the ancient *Laws of Manu*, a classic in Hindu thought, in which the king "has been created (to be) the protector of the castes (*varnas*) and orders, who, all according to their rank, discharge their several duties" (Bühler 1886: 221, verse 35). He must "inflict punishment" lest "the lower ones would [usurp the place of] the higher ones" (Bühler 1886: 219, verses 20-21). It was the king's duty to keep the social classes in order.

The word 'Rajput' means 'son of a king.' The Rajputs of Khalapur look back upon a history of defeat of their kingly rule by Muslim conquerors. So Prithvi Raj was defeated by a Muslim invader around A.D. 1190, and from then until the coming of the British rule in the eighteenth century, there were Muslim rulers in Delhi. A Rajput elder explained:

Unless there can be a Rajput ruler, this can't be a good country. Under the Muslims, the Hindu community was weakened. Prithvi Raj was the last Hindu ruler. Mahmud ousted Prithvi Raj and took his eyes out. After that, the Hindus were never able to get the rule back.

One of the greatest of the Muslim rulers was Akbar (1556-1605), and history records that many Rajputs around Delhi served in Akbar's military forces. A second Rajput elder explained to me that under Akbar, the Rajputs were settled upon estates.

Akbar asked Birbul [his minister], "How can I weaken these Rajputs?" Birbul suggested, "Whichever one does something brave, give him a *jagirdāri* [estate of land]. Then they will leave off living in the cities and will live on the *jagirdāri*. Then there will be less land amongst their descendants, and finally, they will each have little land. Their intellect, too, will become like the land. Just as the land puts up with dirt, so will they. And seeing the oxen, they will become dull like oxen. Because of the land, there will be quarrels amongst them.

This elder's statement reflects the Rajput view that their true work is waging war, that supervising estates has made the Rajputs' brains dull, and that they are cursed with continual disputes over ownership of inherited land. All this is a conspiracy of the Moghul rulers, the elder asserts.

Both Rajputs whom I quote mentioned sexual exploitation of Rajput women by the Moghul conquerors. The first elder said:

The Moghuls had very cruel ways. Akbar would have all the girls over sixteen years old brought to him. He would look them over, and if there was a beautiful girl, he took her to a room. Once he took a Rajput girl from H. village, a very

pretty girl. When Akbar came into the room, she said, "If I were your daughter, what would you do?" He felt ashamed and did nothing. . . . If a girl was born, people were afraid the Muslims would take her, so her parents would kill her. They would put tobacco in her mouth. They would do this, rather than allow her to be dishonored. . . . if they had a big powerful family, they might keep one girl. If a woman was widowed, she was taken from her house with her husband's body, and placed on the pyre and burned alive. That is so she wouldn't be taken by force.

The other explained that child marriage for women had started during the Muslim reign:

Child marriages started with the Muslims. These Muslims were so powerful that if they saw a bride going to her husband they would take her, and if they saw a young girl in a house, they would kidnap her. Then the Hindus started having child-marriages. Otherwise before, they married when they were youths, and then they had better progeny. They were more brave and powerful.

The Rajputs of Khalapur saw themselves as having lost their rule to Muslim conquerors. Under Muslim emperors, they were forced to be estate-holders and were in many ways oppressed.

In my field notes, I find the Rajputs whom I talked with, as well as the Untouchables whom they ruled, referring to their relationship as that of chieftain or king (*rāya*) and subject or rule (*rāyā*) (pronounced as 'rye' and 'rye-ya'). An elderly Bania (shopkeeper) explained the relationship in this way:

For example if I have one or two *bīghas* of land and I build on it a few houses, then the people living there are *rāyās*. The *rāya* takes *bēgārī* [forced labor] from the *rāyā*. When the Chamars (Untouchable leather and field workers) sat in *rāyā* on the land of the *zamīndārs* [landholders], they had to do all sorts of work, and they had little money and education.

The "king" whom this Rajput elder describes is actually one of a clan of "kings," because Khalapur village is dominated by a single clan of Rajputs composed of about six hundred men plus their wives and children, to a total of around twenty-five hundred people (Hitchcock 1956). They owned almost all the land and were trying, in some instances, to expropriate land from others for a complete monopoly on the land—as we shall see in an example below.

II. THE SUBJECTS OF THE 'KINGS'

The remainder of the population of the village, the other 55%, were distributed among some thirty other castes. The formula phrase used in the village was "thirty-six tribes," but our census turned up only thirty-one. The second largest community was that of the Untouchable Chamars (field workers, once leather-workers) numbering about six

hundred. Then come Untouchable Sweepers, around two hundred; about a hundred and fifty Brahmans, traditionally priests, some of whom had some land; about a hundred and fifty Bania shopkeepers and moneylenders; and then a plethora of other castes: goldsmiths, potters, barbers, weavers, carpenters, washermen, and so on.

The heart of a local caste system in India is the *jajmāni* system, by which craft and service caste people exchange their products or services with each other, and obtain grain, food, house sites, and other items of livelihood from households of the landed caste or castes (Wiser 1958 [1936]; Kolenda 1963; Beidelman 1959). The Rajputs were more likely to class themselves *khāsgārs* or masters than *jajmāns* or, as was said in Khalapur, *jījmāns* (clients of an artisan or servant). So the second Rajput elder explained how the introduction of the cash crop, sugar cane, helped first the *khāsgārs*. Then the benefits "trickled down" to the lower castes.

With growing cane, the *khāsgārs* profited. They grew more cane and got more money. Lower castes benefited, because *khāsgārs* were rich, and thus, they employed more labor. If the *khāsgārs* in a country are happy, everyone else will be happy. Even the shopkeepers in a city are dependent on the *khāsgārs*. . . . The *khāsgārs* produce the grain and sell it, and the rest of the world buys it.

He was quite aware of the total dependence of a *lāgdār* (one who fetches and carries) upon a *khāsgār*. When we asked him if a potter would not be better off just selling his pots in a market than in being a *lāgdār*, who as a retainer supplied a client with all the pots the family needed at any time, in return for grain after every harvest, the right to cut cane tops for fodder for their animals and tender leaves for a spinach for themselves, the right to graze their donkeys on the *khāsgār*'s fallow fields, and so on, Elder 2 said:

If they said that, we would tell them, "Don't take grass from our fields. Don't take your donkeys to drink in the canal." And there are all those fallow fields around. We'd tell them, "Don't defecate in our fallow fields. Do it at home." If their children then came to the fields to get cane, we'd beat them. When we cause such trouble, then he has to give pots.

The Rajputs used various terms for the lower castes who worked for them. A *haldi* was a plowman who was engaged for a season or several seasons to cultivate a Rajput's fields. His wife was called a *haldan*. Laborers were called *mazdūr*, a term used for working castes generally. A servant was a *lāgdār* (someone who fetched and carried) or a *kamin* (a menial).

The influence of anti-caste sentiments during the pre- and post-Independence (1947) periods in India had influenced Khalapur, and there was a feeling that the honor or lack of honor paid to a person might depend on his style of life or occupation rather than upon his caste. Frequent

reference was made to the schoolteacher of Untouchable Sweeper caste who was so clean and well-respected as a good teacher that one of the Rajputs had even invited him as a guest to a wedding in his family. There was, however, fear that "if they all become *bābus* and *sāhibs* (clerks and gentlemen), who will plow for us?"

Elder 2 told us the following story, which represents a disappearing attitude, one that supported the *Bhāgavad Gītā* passage saying that it was better to do one's own caste's work badly than the work of another caste well. In the story, the Paṇḍavas are the five brothers who were the heroes of the great Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*; their cousins and enemies are the Kaurāvas. The story goes like this:

Dronacharya was a guru of the Paṇḍavas and the Kauravas. He used to teach them how to shoot the bow and arrow. One day a Bhīl [a tribal] boy came there. Drona taught only boys belonging to the high *khaps* [castes], not boys belonging to a lower caste. The Bhīl said, "Teach me, too." Drona said that he taught only Rajput boys, so he couldn't teach the Bhīl. That boy went away. He made a figure of clay and called it Drona. Every morning, he would bow before it, and he would start practicing with his bow and arrow. One day there were some Paṇḍavas and Kauravas who came there. They aimed their arrows, and he did, too. And the Bhīl boy defeated them. When Drona heard this, he was very upset that his princes should be defeated. He went to the Bhīl. He said, "Whose *chelā* (pupil) are you?" He said, "Drona's." Then Dronacharya said, "I never taught you." Then the Bhīl boy explained that he had made a clay figure and worshipped it and had practiced every morning. Drona said, "All right. I am your guru, but you haven't given me *guru dakshinā*." The Bhīl boy said he would give him whatever he asked. Drona said, "Give me your right thumb." Of course, without that thumb, he would be unable to shoot a bow and arrow. So that boy gave his thumb. The meaning of the story is: a person who uses arms should only be a Rajput.

While present day Rajputs accept the fact that people of lower castes are getting educated and taking up prestigious occupations, they are, as is Dronacharya in the story, jealous of their own traditional high position. The lower castes, in turn, must assure the Rajputs that they do not covet that position. Chatru was Chamar who tried to stand as a candidate for village head when democratic elections were introduced in 1952, but who gave way for a compromise Brahman candidate. As a Chamar, he assured us, "We do not want to be Rajputs or Kshatriyas. We do not hide our identity as Harijans. We are a defeated people. We have no land. No one gives us land."

III. TWO VIEWS OF CASTE: THE UÑCHA-NICHA SYSTEM VERSUS THE BAṘA-CHOṬA SYSTEM

In statements about caste made by both Rajput and Untouchable informants, there emerge two separate views of the local caste hierarchy.

On the one hand, people refer to castes as high and low, *uñcha* and *nicha*. These references concern dirt and pollution. The other system is that of *Baṛi* (Big) castes and *Choti* (Little) castes. References in this view refer to the political and economic power of the Big castes versus the powerlessness of the Little castes.

Untouchability (*Chūrchāt*) and social distance seem to be central in the *uñcha-nicha* system. So frequently informants say that the Untouchables must keep “*dūr, dūr*” ‘far, far,’ because they are dirty and can pollute others. In the *Baṛa-Choṭa* system, however, the *Baṛi* castes frequently have to resort to physical force to keep the Little castes in their place. In the *Uñcha-Nicha* view, Untouchables are low because they are so dirty. Their filthiness is in bodily hygiene, diet, dress, and sexual practices. The Shopkeeper informant said:

If their work is *nicha* [low], and they themselves are dirty and have dirty habits, then they are low, like the Chamars remain so dirty. They don't wash their hair and don't wash themselves. They sit and urinate wherever they find a place. Over there, you see them sitting in a line [defecating together]—all those dirty people sitting. They don't clean themselves. They lie wherever they can. They don't keep clean.

A Chamar elder himself commented on the Chamars' non-vegetarian diet. He said:

Chamars used to eat snakes and all kinds of meat years ago. For the last dozen years, they have been more strict. Brahmans and *Baniyās* have become strict with us. They used to have meetings and give us lectures. People in the city, when we went to sell grass, told us this. And some of the Chamars became educated, so they came to know that you shouldn't eat meat.

One of the duties of a Chamar retainer of a higher caste household is to remove any dead cattle or other animals from their premises. Chamars used to eat the meat from such carcasses, and such a habit was considered to make them very low.

Chamars also used to wear very scanty dress—the women, a brief blouse and short knickers, the men, a loose loin cloth. Such bodily exposure also was considered to be “dirty” by the higher castes.

Rajput Elder 1 commented:

When they had all those bad things [dead carcasses] lying on their doors, we felt contempt for them. They gave a bad smell, and we'd tell them, “Keep away.” When they started improving, then we wouldn't keep them away. Now untouchability is much less. They have gotten rid of dirty habits.

The Chamar women also had the reputation of being sexually promiscuous. A Chamar elder told us:

We were against women's selling grass, because for the grass worth 2 annās, people would give 4 annās and take advantage of the woman. Men would tell them to put the grass inside the house and then take hold of them when they were inside. Now Chamar women in Khalapur do not sell grass.

Some of these dirty habits may be seen in a different light when viewed from the Baṛa-Choṭa perspective.

A third Rajput elder commented:

In the village ten or fifteen years ago, if some Bhangi [Untouchable Sweeper] wore a new and clean piece of clothing, it was disliked by the Rajput, and they sometimes went to the extent of beating him for that.

The promiscuity of lower caste women is sometimes hardly a voluntary condition. So our Chamar elderly informant told us:

The Rajputs try to laugh down honest people. There was a young Potter woman of K. hamlet, wife of B. Rajput men tried to force her into adultery, but she did not agree. She tried to avoid that path. They offered her money, ten or fifteen rupees. Even then, she did not agree. C. and N., Rajputs of K. hamlet, got her by force. She had just come after her *chalā* [second marriage rite], and she was very beautiful. When she did not agree, they trapped her in a house by force, and C., S., and N. raped her there. When they finished off their bad work, they put the rupees on her body and slapped them, and said, "Don't you need these rupees?"

The lower castes' view of the tension between the uñcha-nicha system with the Baṛa-Choṭa caste system is perhaps summarized pithily in our Chamar informant's remark, "The Rajputs are ever ready to have contact with our women, but with us men, they don't even let us touch their clothes."

Untouchables reported that Rajput men pushed Untouchable caste women's husbands out of their own houses, the Rajput taking a man's wife with his full knowledge, the man utterly helpless to prevent it. Our Chamar informant told of a Chamar who used to go to her Rajput lover. When her husband's younger brother went to take her back from the Rajput's, he was beaten by four or five of the men of the Rajput household. He finally had to run away from the village.

The difficulty of taking up better work is illustrated by this story. Our elderly Chamar informant told us that his brother had gotten a good job at a mill at some distance from the village, earning 75 rupees (about \$15) per month. The brother feared walking the distance to and from work, for he feared he would be beaten or killed on the way. He, hence, had built a house in a hamlet located near the mill. The Chamar told us that in old days Chamars could not leave the village freely. If they had to leave permanently, they would run away at night. If they were caught, they might well be both beaten and forced back to work.

We were told the story of the Untouchable *Jatiya* shoemaker who tried to give up dragging away dead animals and was beaten by Rajputs into compliance. So much for trying to give up dirty practices.

John Gumperz, a linguist working in Khalapur at the same time I was, found that the Baṛi and Choṭi castes were also characterized as *dildār*, strong of heart, and *kamdila*, weak-hearted people. But even a strong-hearted Untouchable cannot win, as is shown in the story of Pratap's land, told us by the Chamar elder:

Pratap's forefathers had managed to get 60 *bīghās* of land. The family had receipts showing that they had paid rent on the land for forty years. Pratap's father quarreled with some Rajputs whose land was next to his, and whose land he had to cross to reach his own. The upshot was that the Rajputs refused to let him cross their land. They also tapped so much water from the common irrigation canal that his land was left dry. They let their cattle go into his fields, and they cut his partly-grown sugar cane. Eventually, a group of Rajputs attacked Pratap, his father, and brother, as well as some other related Chamars. Pratap, his brother, and another Chamar were knocked unconscious and were taken in a bullock cart to the police station in the town six miles away. A litigation was initiated by the Chamars to protest the Rajputs' beating them. They used a medical certificate stating the extent of the wounded Chamars' injuries. The case dragged on in the courts for four months. Leading Rajputs of the village tried to reach a compromise settlement with Pratap's father, but he refused. Eventually, however, pressure upon him was such that he withdrew the case from the courts. After that, Pratap's father was never able to work peacefully in his fields. Sometimes a crop of sugar cane would be cut and taken away, or else eaten by Rajputs' cattle, purposely put into his fields. The Rajputs would not allow him to walk through their fields, and they would cut off his water supply. Finally, Pratap's father had to sell his land.

There was resentment, however, on the part of some of his enemies among Rajputs that he had not sold some of his land to them. After the land was sold, Pratap's son was bringing his bride home from D. On the way, they met L. and S., enemy Rajputs, coming from the sugar mill. They beat the son senseless, and they took his bride into the sugar cane fields and raped her. Some men coming from D. heard her screaming and helped her.

What the juxtaposition of the *uñcha-nicha* system and the Baṛa-Choṭa system indicates is that the Big castes kept the Little castes in both a relatively powerless position and in a dirty or defiled state through force. While the lower castes were looked down upon for being dirty and poor, and for the women's being promiscuous, the Rajputs' own actions forced such conditions onto the Little castes. The Rajputs can blind themselves, as did one of our Rajput informants by saying, "The Sweeper (Untouchable) is only concerned about bread and grain."

IV. DHARMA AND KARMA

There may be some truth to the belief held by one of the Chamar informants that the Rajputs in the past were protectors, more than exploiters, of the lower castes. He said:

The Rajputs are very jealous of the Little caste people having good clothes. The Rajputs used to be good. They would see our mothers and daughters with good hearts. Now they don't. Therefore, they are less powerful. They saw the poor and gave things. Now they don't. They were more powerful then. It used to be that if anyone who was more powerful than we troubled us, that the Rajputs used to protect us. They would face the powerful ones troubling us. Now, they themselves suppress us.

In this statement, the Chamar informant perhaps records the change in Rajput attitudes from an earlier situation when their dominant position was not challenged by Gandhian, Congress, and other reformers who wanted to elevate the lot of low castes and Untouchables. He, further, implies the traditional Hindu idea that when people do not follow their religiously given duty, their *dharmā*—which involves the protection of those dependent upon them—their physical and social conditions are greatly weakened.

The religious, philosophical Hindu idea that one's caste reflected one's virtue or vice in past lives was only occasionally voiced by people in Khalapur. Thus Rajput Elder 1 said:

Some become Untouchables because in previous lives they did not do those things which they ought to have done. If a member of an Untouchable group does his work honestly, and works hard, and does not hurt anyone, he can be born into a higher caste group in his next life. In the same way, if a Rajput or Brahman is dishonest, and creates trouble for others, then he may be born into a Bhangi family and into some other low caste group. Rajputs and Brahmans have high position, because their members have been honest and have done their duties in previous lives. A Bhangi woman probably did bad in past lives.

Needless to say, such a justification for low or Little caste position was not voiced, nor consciously accepted, by Untouchables or low caste groups (Kolenda 1964).

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have drawn on lengthy interviews that I made in Khalapur village in 1954-1956, about the caste system. I have relied particularly upon statements made by six men—three Rajputs, one Bania shopkeeper, and two Untouchable Chamars. I have tried to suggest that there is a vocabulary and a view of caste in Khalapur that is part of a regal tradition.

In summary, let me quote Rajput elder 3 who said:

In this village, people are in favor of the caste system. They think it is a good way of ordering society. It was a teaching of their forefathers to think in this way. The feeling is still strong among the villagers, although the government is very much against caste and preaches against it.

Since the data upon which I base this paper were collected in the mid-1950s, the reader may ask: Is there still such a caste system? I have not done ethnographic field work in Khalapur since 1956, although I have visited the village briefly twice since then, once in 1967 and once in 1974. While the village has prospered, because of the cash crop of sugar cane, the quarters for Untouchables were even more crowded than they were in the 1950s. Some Untouchables have become educated; one of the Sweeper high school boys whom I had known earlier was an elementary school teacher in Khalapur in 1967. The conditions of life for the vast majority of Sweepers and other Untouchables, however, had not improved noticeably, and since the landless lower castes tend to lose out with the increasing commercialization of agriculture, they may be worse off (Kolenda 1978:133-140).

Others have studied Untouchables in recent years. Marc Galanter (1972) has shown that recent law protecting Untouchables has generally not been enforced, nor supported by the courts. Sunanda Patwardhan (1973) cites many instances of atrocities against Untouchables in her book, *Change Among India's Harijans*, and perusal of Indian newspapers for any length of time will reveal the continuance of the kind of high-low, Big-Little suppression reported for Khalapur in the mid-1950s.

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