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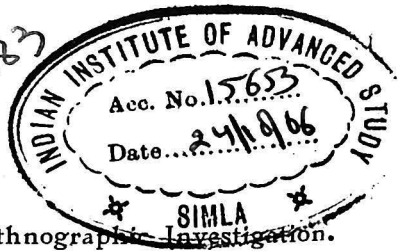
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10. Some Aspects of Ethnographic Investigation.

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The Census Reports of India and the various Gazetteers contain a large amount of miscellaneous information bearing on the manners and customs of different castes and tribes. But the investigation about caste and tribal usages was placed on a systematic basis when the Ethnographic Survey of India was organized under Sir Herbert Risley, whose work in this field will long continue to be of preponderant authority. A number of questions were drawn up and sent out to those who undertook to make the investigation in different provinces. As the experience on the basis of which these heads of enquiry were formulated had been mainly gathered in Northern India, it is not strange that certain details which are of subordinate significance in other parts of the country, are put forward as important, while other matters of more importance in other localities are either ignored or thrust to the background.

Anthropology, as you know, may be said to have begun with the study of savages. Most of the works which have given dignity to the subject have been written about the manners and customs of the primitive races. The civilised nations of the West have little or no respect for customary rites and creeds merely as such. They have become rationalistic and utilitarian; and if occasionally they have kept up some ceremonies and social rules of the old world, they attach no value to them, and have no faith in their efficacy or binding force, but keep them up as picturesque survivals of a bygone age. Things that were once held most sacred and mysterious are merely enacted as stage plays and are carefully rehearsed beforehand for a study of realistic effect.

We shall no doubt not readily concede, at any rate without many important reservations, that we are much behind our Western brethren in intelligence and refinement of understanding. But we cannot help admitting that the great majority of our people believe in the efficacy and necessity of our caste rules and customs. To us they are living forces and not merely curiosities of a pre-historic age. No doubt, they are gradually but slowly losing their strength and their hold on popular belief and allegiance, and it may be that many of them will eventually die out. It is perhaps all the more interesting and necessary that they should be investigated and

registered while yet there is time. It may be that a study of these beliefs and vestiges of long-forgotten creeds may discover unexpected and disconcerting affinities; but an ethnographer has no bias and no partiality; he records facts collected on a systematic plan and generally leaves it to others to draw inferences.

Reasoning is a much slower and more laborious process in the earlier stages of culture than those who are educated according to modern methods are apt to imagine. Imitation and usage are the most powerful factors in the maintenance of social and religious customs, and they have the merit of saving a great deal of personal trouble. The scope of Ethnography is explained as a systematic description of the characteristics, history, traditions, customs, language, religion, and generally of the mental, social and political condition of peoples, races, tribes, castes and similar ethnic or social groups. Ethnology has usually concerned itself more with people in the earlier and relatively primitive stages of development. The reasons for this limitation of its sphere are not far to seek. We are, or consider ourselves to be, quite familiar with what goes on around us; and we take these things as a matter of course and do not consider it worth our while to waste time in recording them. Perhaps also in our familiarity, we miss the traits and peculiarities that are really vital and important. Moreover the phases of the society of the earlier ages and stages have passed away or are likely soon to pass away; and we are anxious that they should be investigated and recorded before they are irrevocably lost to us. Perhaps also with regard to ourselves and our present, we lack the disinterested aloofness and judicial impartiality that are necessary for a proper scientific investigation of such facts. We can afford to be (as a recent writer puts it) candid about bees and ants, and may dissect and describe the manners and customs and characteristics of people who are far removed from us. But when it comes to a description and consideration of our own manners and customs, we are troubled with many doubts and distractions.

The peculiarity of our country in respect of ethnographic research seems to me to be that many customs and usages exist here as living facts, side by side with a culture not attained by any race which has hitherto been supplying the data accumulated by investigators in this field.

I may perhaps now proceed to give certain examples to show that there are important differences between Northern and Southern India—at any rate, I can speak with some confidence of Mysore—in the applicability of the tests laid down in the guide issued under Sir Risley's direction for determining the comparative rank and other significant details of different castes and tribes within the pale of Hinduism. The Southern

Indian castes are (theoretically at any rate) more exclusive than in the north, in the matter of eating and drinking. The water test has no applicability, for the higher castes do not use water touched by any caste with whom they are prohibited from taking meals. Between boiled articles and fried articles of food there is no doubt some difference even in this part of the country; but here again, the higher castes consider it correct to avoid altogether any prepared food touched by those whom they consider inferior in caste or rank. The test whether Brahmans minister or not to any caste also has only a limited application. There are many quite important castes, who do not require the services of the Brahmans at all; and no Brahmans can be discovered in this part of the country who have lost status from rendering religious service to any castes.

Of the questions required to be specially answered, some are quite useless and inapplicable in Mysore. Hypergamy, except as an indication of a natural desire to marry a girl in as high a family as possible, shows very little trace of its existence, and polyandry is quite unknown. Polygamy is indeed theoretically permissible, but it has practically disappeared.

Totemism occupies an important place while dealing with savage tribes. In his great work on Totemism and Exogamy, Dr. J. G. Frazer has defined Totemism as an intimate relation which is supposed to exist between a group of kindred people on the one side and a species of natural or artificial objects on the other side, which objects are called the totems of the human group. As observed in India, it is defined as the custom by which a division of a tribe or caste bears the name of an animal, a tree or a plant, or of some material object natural or artificial, which the members of that group are prohibited from killing, eating, cutting, burning, carrying, using, etc. The latter description answers with a fair degree of accuracy, to what has been gathered in the course of ethnographic enquiries in Mysore. In many non-Brahman castes, the names of exogamous divisions are given as those of a plant, or a mineral or other material object, and the prohibition to cut, burn or otherwise injure these objects is observed. In other cases, no particular significance is attached, while perhaps in some of them, the restrictions have been forgotten. Some of the Morasu Okkalu divisions even refrain from touching the article that has given the name to them. In other castes (e.g., Madigas), though the rule of not cutting, eating, etc., is observed by some subdivisions, in others, it is altogether forgotten, and no significance is attached to the name. Curiously in some cases a new prohibition is substituted for one that has been forgotten, e.g., a particular flower or a particular grain. During marriages, among Brahmans, a twig of a particular tree is worshipped as house-god (ಮನೆ ದೇವರು),

but it is not used to name the subdivision and no prohibition as to its use is observed. It is said that each family worships the tree or shrub which its ancestor caught to save himself from the flood at the universal deluge. In many castes, however, there are no vestiges of such observances, and the subdivisions are named on some other principle altogether.

Between this kind of observance and that described by Mr. Frazer as totemism there is a very wide difference. There is here no idea of any identity of interest or intimacy of relationship between a tribe bearing a name and the article denoted by the name, though how this particular name was originally adopted, cannot be guessed now. In some cases, the restrictive rules are not at all known, and the names do not even denote exogamous groups. It may therefore be doubted whether there is anything gained by applying the same term to such diverse things as totemism as observed among savage races, and what passes as such among Indian tribes and castes. At any rate, I do not think that the evidence justifies us in stating the conclusion otherwise than as I stated in connection with the subdivision of the caste of Kurubas: "These names, if totemistic at all, may be so in only a few cases, while a large number seem to be names adopted without any inward significance. In some instances, however, it is well ascertained that the objects which give the name to a group are not used for eating or otherwise even now . . . it should be premised that much stronger evidence than this is required to justify the conclusion that they originated with what is styled totemism when dealing with primitive tribes."

It may be interesting to notice some of the difficulties experienced in the collection of facts and beliefs concerning Ethnography. In the first place, men who have the requisite knowledge are rare. In the case of the majority of castes, there are no written accounts and one has to rely on the memory of the older members or of the priests or others who are acquainted with the manners and customs of the group. There are whole villages in which the number of any particular caste is insignificant, and none of them are familiar with such details concerning themselves. Then again, the original customs themselves are often forgotten, and the members have satisfied themselves by copying those of their neighbours who are nearest to them in rank. In many cases, where the inner meaning of a particular usage is not understood, they have either dropped the original usage or substituted something in its place. Indeed I should not be surprised that when the accounts of the Ethnographic Survey of India have been some time before the world, they should be appealed to as authoritative expositions of the usages of particular castes by the castes themselves. At any rate, I am certain that we take

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more care and work more disinterestedly to ascertain and record existing usages and beliefs. Some people are so impressed with the usefulness of getting their real or fancied claims recorded in these books, that I have often received representations from representatives of various castes, asking me to class them under such and such heads, and to show their superiority over other rival castes in various particulars.

Another serious difficulty often experienced is the anxiety of various castes to advance claims which are not generally admitted by their neighbours, or to conceal facts and usages which may have the effect of making them rank with castes considered inferior. This often takes the form of giving out Gotras like the Dvija classes, denying the use of certain articles of food and drink eschewed by what are considered the higher castes, putting on the sacred thread after the manner of the Brahmans, denying the existence of practices regarded as heterodox such as marriages of grown-up women, marriage of widows, and the dedication of unmarried women as Basavis.

With a growing tendency to challenge the superiority of the Brahman caste, is observed an anxiety to claim the title in some form or other for themselves and a tendency to subject themselves to fresh restrictions to make good that claim. It seems to me that some of these people do not know how well off they are, and wish to put on manacles of usages which the Brahman is finding burdensome.

In some cases, the more advanced members of a community have organized leagues and gone about among their people, telling them what names and titles to give out to the Census officers, and what practices to conceal or deny to the more inquisitive investigator of Ethnography. It has become almost impossible to get an unvarnished account of actually existing divisions and subdivisions of certain castes. Thus where the practice of Basavi dedication was freely admitted some years ago, it is felt (and naturally so felt) that it is degrading, and its existence is denied even where it has not died out. One can sympathize with this feeling and it may reasonably be hoped that the feeling is the first step in real reformation. In many non-Brahman castes, there are two kinds of marriages, the more formal one, and the less formal one known as Kutike (or union). To one who looks to the essence and not merely to form, there is little difference between the two; but the observance of the latter is not always admitted. A similar remark may be made about the marriage of widows.

Again in some castes, which do not admit the superiority of the Brahman, they divide themselves into the standard four castes, though perhaps their caste or religion was from the outset regarded as a protest against the peculiarly Brahmanical tenets. A number of Gotras are instituted and each family assigned some one of them, and directed only to return that

and to deny the existence of any different *ratio dividendi* at all in the caste. Curiously, however, if one goes to the interior of the country and catches unsophisticated elderly members to question, they are found to be quite ignorant of the new-fangled Gotras and Sutras and admit the existence of various so-called unorthodox usages and institutions, and answer to the old names of recognized subdivisions.

One of the important questions that are required to be answered relates to the origin of castes. How or why a particular caste arose, or why distinctions which are merely social or transient in all the other countries of the world became stereotyped and unalterable in India, is a large question which an ethnographer who is concerned more with facts and beliefs than with theories, can hardly be expected to answer. But the answers generally elicited in the course of such investigation are sufficiently curious to deserve a passing notice. There is hardly a caste that if it does not claim direct divine descent, is satisfied without some divine intervention at its birth. When the Lord of the Universe found it necessary to light the world at night, he created a caste out of the sweat of his body and commissioned it to provide oil to the inhabitants. Another caste sprung out of a sacrificial fire to provide bangles and other articles of feminine adornment, to satisfy the longings of a divine lady. The need to clothe mankind brought another caste; and the wish of the gods for exhilarating drinks gave rise to another, of which the fall into this mundane sphere was caused by the sin of covetousness, as the members took to adulterating the liquor. Even the humble caste of Madigas claim to be connected with a Rishi at their origin, and say that their low state is due to the partiality of their progenitor for beef. The caste of barbers was born from the eye of Siva, and became Nayana-Khshatriyas. Vaddas were created also out of the sweat of his body by Siva who wished to find water to assuage the thirst of his consort Parvati.

Such accounts of fanciful origin merely point to a consciousness in the community to show that they realize the function which each particular caste came to fulfil in the social economy, or to distinguish their tribal or local origin from that of the general population of the province in which they find themselves. There are indeed stories which are even more fantastic and of which it is difficult to make out the meaning or to which only a far-fetched semblance of meaning can be attached.

In a few cases, however, less ambitious and perhaps historical traditions of origin are recounted. They are chiefly concerned with showing that the caste in a particular locality was originally not indigenous. Thus the Dombars caste came from the Telugu country; Komatis or Vaisyas from Ayodhya in Northern India; and Kadugollas from the neighbourhood of

Delhi. Some, such as Lambanis, indicate the place of their origin from the language used by them and from their usages which differ palpably from what are observed around them.

The determination of the social status and the relative rank of castes is one of the most delicate tasks falling to the lot of an ethnographist in this country. It is perhaps the best course to eschew it and to resort to some colourless arrangement, as an alphabetical one. Still the thing exists and the accounts will be incomplete if some information is not given on this head. Some terms such as Sudra and even well-known names of particular castes have altogether to be avoided if one would not raise a hornet's nest round one's ears. A change of name, it may be true, does not import a change of quality in the object named, but if people have a strong sentiment on such matters, there can be no harm in respecting it. There is an agreement among people generally that the old names Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaisya connote a certain degree of superior social rank. Many castes who did not think of claiming these distinctions formerly, are now anxious to class themselves under one or the other of them, while with some inconsistency, they would not tolerate similar pretensions on the part of their rivals. Many classes would range themselves as Brahmans, while some go further and claim to be the only true and genuine original Brahmans. In the same way, many classes have ranged themselves as Kshatriyas, while a few with more modesty are satisfied to be Vaisyas.

Still, there are some principles which are undisputed and which would provide a ready test for setting at rest such controversies. The most important test is that of birth and descent, which is all but conclusive in the case of individuals. The next element is whether a particular caste has been habitually following the particular Samskaras such as Upanayana, etc., laid down in the Sastras for the Dvija classes. Another is provided by the standard of personal hygiene, and the observances of rules of ceremonial purity. Articles of food and drink are arranged in a certain order; flesh eating is considered incorrect for certain castes, and so the drinking of spirituous liquors. Even among those to whom meat is not prohibited, certain classes of meat such as beef are absolutely forbidden to all but three or four of the lowest strata of society. Then there are some customs, such as marriage after puberty and marriage of widows, which are considered improper for certain castes, and the same remark may be made about some trades and professions. Lastly, there is the traditional rank of each caste, which though concealed from Census returns, is well settled and thoroughly well known to the other castes living in the locality.

Then as to marks which differentiate castes, the rule of endogamy is perhaps the most important test. Yet it would

not be correct to say that the caste circle and the circle of endogamy are the same. It is well known that there are many different endogamous groups or sub-castes among Brahmans, and in many non-Brahman castes such as Gollas and Bedas. The larger classes are universally regarded as comprising a single caste, and there is nothing to be gained by altering the signification of such a well-known term by making caste synonymous with an endogamous group. One effect of such a change would be to make the work of the social reformer more difficult; for though an intermarriage between different castes may at present be taken as quite inadmissible, that between persons of different endogamous groups within the same caste, would only be regarded as, at its worst, an incorrect thing.

The other test, of commensality, is still less a guide. Leaving the Brahmans apart who cannot eat with other castes, there are groups of castes which are allowed to dine together, though they cannot intermarry. Thus for example, Okkaligas of different castes, Kurubas, and some other of the higher non-Brahman castes can all dine in each other's house. It may be a wise thing for reformers for a long while yet to direct their efforts chiefly on the fusion of such groups by introducing inter-marriages between sections who can publicly dine with each other. The only certain test appears to be birth in a caste as attested by general repute, though certain castes admit recruits from higher castes to a limited extent. The difficulty of applying any other test led to the common reluctance to have social relations with persons whose origin was unknown.

I suppose it was the great anxiety to secure purity of blood, that was at the bottom of the custom of child marriages. Still, the rule does not seem to have originally been so rigorous as it has become in recent times. It is curious that Nambudri Brahmans who are most rigid in following the old Sutras, should have no objection to keep women unmarried to a late age. Perhaps it is compensated for by the inquisitorial rigour with which they pursue those unfortunate women who are suspected of any sexual weakness. You know that we have a mild law in Mysore intended to check unduly early child marriages; but the principal persons who incur penalties under it are invariably those in whose caste late marriages are not at all considered heterodox. I have not come across a single case among Brahmans, among whom marrying girls below ten is becoming quite exceptional. We may safely assume that even without any outside stimulus of legislation, the age of marriage is being gradually raised in the higher castes.

Religion, like language, though intimately associated with caste, is not by any means a decisive factor. Accession to an utterly alien faith like Christianity or Muhammadanism irrevocably breaks the bonds of caste; but within the pale, a great deal of latitude exists. Within the caste of Brahmans and

within its sub-castes (or endogamous groups) there may be members who speak Telugu or Kannada or Tamil, and there may be men who are Saivas or Vaishnavas, or Smartas, Maddhvas or Sri-Vaishnavas. The same phenomenon, allegiance to different faiths (Saiva or Vaishnava or even Jaina) may be observed within the pale of many non-Brahman groups as well as difference of home language according to the place of birth of the individuals. As for minor deities, faith or want of faith in them hardly counts for anything.

I am afraid, gentlemen, that I have taken more than my just share of your valuable time; and thanking you for the indulgent hearing you have been pleased to give me, I beg you to forgive the inevitable defects in my treatment of a subject of wide interest and importance.

