Global Issues as Seen in the Hindu Context

Rethinking Caste
A Review of Gupta's *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy?*

by Dayanand Bharati

Dayanand Bharati's origins are in Tamil Nadu state of South India, where he still spends most of his time. He is no armchair academic, rather a pilgrim who continues to travel extensively around India, interacting with fellow–pilgrims of manifold persuasions. He enjoys plants and gardening almost as much as books and reading. Dayanand Bharati is the author of the books Understanding Hinduism *and* Living Water and Indian Bowl.

C aste is too often presented simplistically, distorting the complex reality of Indian life. New sociological studies are demonstrating the complexity and diversity of caste as experienced by different caste communities in different parts of India. A recent compilation of works by various scholars points in the right direction for clear thinking on this important topic. The volume, *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy?* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004) is edited by Dipankar Gupta, sociology professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

Asking the right question, this book also gives the correct answer about caste, which is more an identity and not merely about hierarchy. This question is relevant on various levels, since "the idea of caste has been very deeply embedded in the modern Indian self-image." (Jodka, p. 187) Of course, "This is partly because, to a large extent, the Indian self-image is itself a mirror reflection of the orientalist and colonial images of India." (ibid.) This self-image (based on Orientalist and colonial constructions) is important for understanding the very complex questions about caste in India.

Any study of India primarily based on texts, at the expense of sociological contexts, will only mislead, and particularly this is true in regard to caste. Challenging the traditional view of caste as "single all-encompassing hierarchy" (Gupta, p. vii), the authors of the articles in this book do not give mere theoretical conclusions based on some scripture or text, but present the results of their field research. This research was carried on at a pan-Indian level among various castes and religious communities. It clearly portrays a different picture from what is usually accumulated from ancient texts.

Change and continuity mark every living civilization. Particularly Indian civilization survived because of its adaptability and flexibility, and this is clearly reflected in the area of caste. Though caste has now become a question of "iden-

tity," yet it has not completely lost all aspects of "hierarchy." Dipankar Gupta points out that

> No doubt our undue dependence on literary texts has obscured from our view the true nature of caste. If caste identities are today visible everywhere to the naked eye it is not because this is a new attribute but because our obsession with the pure hierarchy did not allow us to see this phenomenon in its true colours. If caste and politics now dominate power calculations in India, this should not be taken to mean that caste was impervious to politics in the past. What has happened instead is that castes today have a different context in which they can express their identity-driven politics. As the context has undergone major modifications (such as through urbanization, adult franchise, etc.), caste identities are expressing themselves differently from the ways they did before.
>
> In this sense it would be incorrect to rush to the conclusion that castes have changed in contemporary India. What we should acknowledge instead is that contemporary transparencies have brought to light aspects of caste that were previously darkened by imperfect lenses. Caste has not changed, but the potentialities that were always there within this stratificatory system are now out in the open, and in full view. True, contemporary contexts should be congratulated for allowing us to see these "certitudes" in caste…Castes cannot change intrinsically as long as they are fundamentally founded on identities that draw their sustenance from a rhetoric of natural differences that are imbued with notions of purity and impurity: as the saying goes, the more things change the more they are the same. (pp. xix-xx)

This review will draw out various themes about caste that are developed in this fine collection of articles. Right from editor Gupta's introduction it is clear that the traditional Brahminical hierarchical view of caste does not stand up to the contextual studies presented in this book:

> The articles in this volume begin with the assumption of assertive caste iden-

tities that are in no way embarrassed by Brahmanical renditions. In fact, none of the contributions in this selection could have been imagined if the Brahman notion of hierarchy were really as definitive as scholars and members of the literati often tend to assume. (p. xii)

This traditional position of a Brahmanical hierarchy, which was the single paradigm to understand caste, was promoted in Dumont's recent study.[1] This view, "biased towards the Brahminical interpretation…did not take into account other points of view;" particularly

Each caste has a notion of caste hierarchy which is constantly contested by other castes.
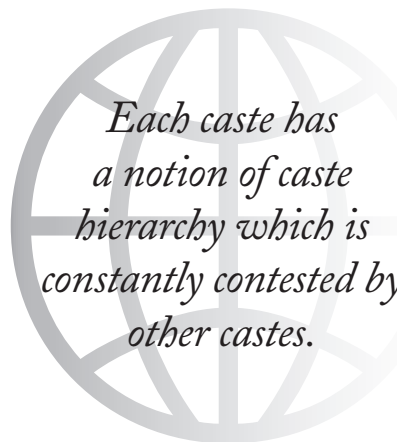
> [t]he origin tales make it quite clear that most of the castes in the villages associate themselves with the Kshatriya varna category, and none of them with the Shudra category. Such a position taken by castes, including those belonging to the "Scheduled Caste" category, should not be construed as a case of "Sanskritisation" guided by an all-encompassing ideology based on the religious principle of purity and pollution…All castes in the villages, including the depressed lower castes, consider themselves pure in religious terms. (Sahay, pp. 119, 120)[2]

It is important to note, as Gaurang Sahay shows, that the

> hierarchy that actually gets to work its will on others in a caste society is the hierarchy of the economically and politically powerful. This does not mean, however, that other hierarchies are not there, waiting in the wings, as it were, to claim their rightful place in the sun. A single hierarchy, whether

Brahmin or Kshatriya, is a bit too parlous to accommodate the multiple nodes along which castes can, and do, operate. (Ibid. p. 115)

It is now clear that instead of a "single all-encompassing hierarchy" (Gupta, p. vii.), it is rather the case that "assertive caste identities articulate alternative hierarchies" (ibid., p. x.), of course with "hardly any unanimity on ranking between *jatis*." (ibid.)

This, of course, does not negate the fact that

> the castes that are depressed in the villages, such as the "Scheduled Castes" and many "Backward Castes," believe that their present condition is an outcome either of misdeeds committed by their forefathers or of elite caste (such as Brahmin) chicanery. They maintain that those who consider them less pure or impure impose on them certain rules, ideologies, ritual practices and styles of life. (Sahay, p. 120)

Though this is true, yet "in fact, each caste has a notion of caste hierarchy which is constantly contested by other castes." (ibid., p. 124) Sahay points out that

> Gupta argues that overemphasis on any single hierarchy, whether Brahmin or Kshatriya, ignores the fact that there is no caste that is not proud of its legacy, beliefs and practices. It is for this reason, he urges, that castes should first be apprehended in terms of "discrete categories," attentive to what each caste considers to be its intrinsic worth. (Ibid. p. 115)

Sahay's essay casts serious doubt on the dominance of the Sanskritization phenomena (i.e., that lower castes seek to make cultural and ritual adjustments to the higher (Brahminical) norms so as to rise in social status):

> The concept of Sanskritisation is based on the understanding that in the caste hierarchy, lower or "non-twice born" castes do not value their own customs, rituals, ideologies and styles of life. That is why they always try to give them up by imitating the customs, rituals, ideology and way of life of a higher "twice born" caste.

Regardless of what may have happened in the past, castes with economic and political power do not think of Sanskritising their style of life but instead re-emphasise their discrete character by highlighting the superiority of their own ideologies, customs, rituals and styles of life. They are not at all ashamed of their identities, but on the contrary, feel proud of them. (Ibid. p. 121)

The reality of vertical mobility to improve caste status must also be noted. John E. Cort discusses various aspects of this in his study on "Jains, Caste and Hierarchy in North Gujarat." First he shows how the Patels in their rise up the caste hierarchy did not emulate Brahmins, but rather Vaisyas:

When the Patels started to achieve economics success in the mid-19th century as successful farmers, and then as successful industrialists and merchants, the caste-grouping they chose to emulate in order to raise their status was not the Brahmans or the Rajputs, but the Vaaniyaas…the highest status Brahmans in Gujarat have been the Naagar Brahmans, not because of any ritual or scholarly qualifications, but because they are the one *jaati* of Brahmans that has been able to compete successfully with the Vaaniyaas as merchants. (Cort, pp. 80-81)

The Jain perspective demonstrates varying meanings behind common activities.

For the Jains, purity as defined by the Brahmans is a secondary, social (*saamaajik*) value, without any ultimate soteriological importance. (ibid., p. 83)

Jains will accept food cooked by Brahmins, but not because they consider Brahmins to be pure:

Both Jains and Brahmans accept the food because it is cooked by a Brahman; but the Jains accept it for the additional reason that it is Jain food cooked according to the laws of ahimsa…The underlying ideology of purity here is not a Brahmanical one, but rather a Jain one of ahimsa. (Ibid. pp. 84-85)

Note that Jain mythology "derided Brahman claims to superiority" (ibid. p. 101), even showing that since "a

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Brahman is unworthy of bearing a Jina, Mahavir's embryo was then transferred to the womb of a Ksatriya woman at the intervention of several deities." (ibid. p. 101)

Surinder Jodhka's field research in Punjab focused on the Dalit caste of Ad-Dharmis. Despite Sikh egalitarian principles and the general weakness of Brahmanical ideology in Punjab, still it remained true that "different servicing castes were tied to the landowning cultivators within the framework of the jajmani system." (p. 175)

While the Sikh reformers attacked caste, the Sikh leadership, having become aware of the significance of numbers, did not deny the existence of caste among the Sikhs or that the low castes among the Sikhs faced disabilities due to their birth. (ibid. p. 179)

Resisting this, the Ad-Dharmis "insisted they be listed as a separate religious community and not be clubbed with the Hindus. After independence, the Ad-Dharmis were listed as one of the Scheduled Castes of the Punjab and were clubbed with the Hindus once again." (ibid. pp. 180-81)

These case studies from other religious communities demonstrate the

need to abandon the attempt to locate a single ideology behind the practice of caste throughout the subcontinent. (Cort, p. 102)

However Jodhka, quoting Gupta, accepts the fact that "the underlying assumption of it [caste] being a pan-Indian reality is rarely questioned…when it comes to theorising about the caste system it is the bookview that tends to dominate."[3] One of the main reasons for this is the acceptance of "colonial and orientalist notions of Indian civilization." (Jodhka, p. 187)[4]

The most complex and contested area in caste study relates to the Dalits (for-

merly "untouchables"). G.K. Karnath particularly looked at the replication of high caste ways (Sanskritization) by low castes in Karnataka. He suggests that

By drawing on empirical evidence from a Karnataka village, this article attempts to refute the idea of a passive acceptance of a low and subordinate status by the former Untouchable castes. It aims to show that the apparent replication may also be viewed as one of the ways of articulating an independent cultural identity, besides demonstrating dissent against the hegemonic social order. In the process, the article makes an attempt to refocus the Dumontian discourse from "replication and consensus" to "hegemony and dissent." (Karnath, p. 137)

This he shows in the case of the Madigas:

The Madigas wanted to carry on with their traditional practice of buffalo sacrifice regardless of its supposed opposition to Hindu values according to the definition of the dominant social order. This is not a replication resulting from exclusion from the dominant order or consensus with it, but a reaffirmation of a distinct cultural identity. (Ibid. p. 157)

Yet, as Jodhka points out, the Dalit movement tends to share the traditional Brahminical hierarchical perspective on caste:

Caste has been seen to represent the continuity and unity of Indian culture and its social structure. Interestingly, it is not only the nationalist/Hindu ideologue, or sometimes the professional anthropologist, who makes such claims; even the contemporary dalit movement in India is mostly informed by a similar Brahmin-centric notion of caste. (Jodhka, pp. 187-88)

Further on this point, Badri Narayan shows that

The caste histories of many lower castes were written during the colo-

nial period not by scholars of their own caste, but by Arya Samaji activists and scholars who tried to give the middle and lower castes an identity and create a space for them within the Brahminical social system. Many books were published enumerating the qualities of persons belonging to the Brahmin or Kshatriya castes. While the books that were composed by Sanatanis tried to restrict the entry of backward classes into the hallowed ranks of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, those written by Arya Samajis gave space to the lower and backward classes to claim Brahmin or Kshatriya status. Thus upper-caste characteristics were appropriated into the histories of the backward castes. (Narayan, p. 197)

But once awakened to the reality of gaining political power through caste vote-banks, leaders and scholars among the backward and low caste people

sought to win acceptance from the wider society by creating and legitimizing a space for themselves within the nationalist narratives. (ibid., pp. 200-201)

This they had to do by creating a new history, by acquiring a double identity

both as members of a specific caste reiterating their caste pride, and as an important dalit-Bahujan community that had made sacrifices for the nation. (ibid. p. 216)

This double identity of the dalit caste required a new history different from, and sometimes subversive to, the sanskritic model of caste history writing that had emerged during the colonial period. They needed to create caste histories that could provide self-respect to the caste, like the *gaurav gathas*, which glorified dalit socio-cultural locations. These *gaurav gathas* mostly shifted away from Brahminical symbols, although there are still traces of the sanskritisation process. Progress towards the glorification of dalit status is quite visible in these contemporary history writings. (ibid. p. 216)

But no caste can be safe from the conniving of politicians, as they know how to politicize religion and communalize politics:

Nonetheless, some of the residual sanskritising features of the caste histories have paved the way for political forces like the BJP, who are then using the lower-caste origin myths associated with Rishis and Sants belonging to the Great Traditions to enter into the dalit space…reinterpreting dalit myths, histories and symbols in their own politically correct version, projecting the dalits as defenders of Hindu dharma and "nationalists" *(rashtravadi).*[5] (Ibid., p. 216)

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It is not only the new Hindu right (BJP), but every political party wants to gain their own pound of flesh:

The social equations in the electoral market are apparent in the framing and re-telling of the stories by the different political parties. Through these caste histories, political parties channelise the dalit sense of identity in their own favour while at the same time swaying them against their political rivals. The use of the myth of Uda Devi, who is a part of the Pasi *gaurav gatha*, can be cited as an example of how various parties like the BSP, BJP, Lok Janshakti and Samajwadi Party are interpreting it in their own way to bring dalit communities, especially the Pasis, into their own fold. (Ibid. p. 219)

While these caste communities have to fight to create their own space in politics and power with the politicians, they also have to fight with other groups within their fold to keep the unity of a dalit-Bahujan collective identity. While Chamars assert that the Pasis oppressed the dalit castes on behalf of the colonial overlords, under the new political regime, the Pasis seem to be eager to minimize these contradictions by writing that Chamar interests were safeguarded by the Pasis.

There is always a struggle between ideology and reality. While "assertive caste identities articulate alternative hierarchies" (Gupta, p. x) and try to work out their own salvation by vertical mobility to improve their social status, yet, when it comes to practical life, "in ideological matters, one is not concerned with actual facts." (Narayan, p. 235) This is demonstrated by the field research done by Anuja Agrawal among the Beidas ("a 'denotified' community which lives off the prostitution of its own women," p. 221). Agrawal points out that

While the inclination of community members is to pass off as belonging to an upper caste, eligibility for state benefits requires an acceptance of their lower-caste origins. (ibid. p. 241)

Finally, the truth about caste in India is that "caste identities too undergo change," and they have never functioned as "pure ideological systems." (Jodhka, p. 189) "While ideologically it is dead, or nearly so, caste survives and thrives as a source of identity." (ibid.) **IJFM**

Notes

[1] Dumont, Louis. 1970. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications.* London: Paladin. According to Dumont, caste ranking is based on purity and impurity, and levels of purity are defined and maintained by strict control over formal ritual transactions.
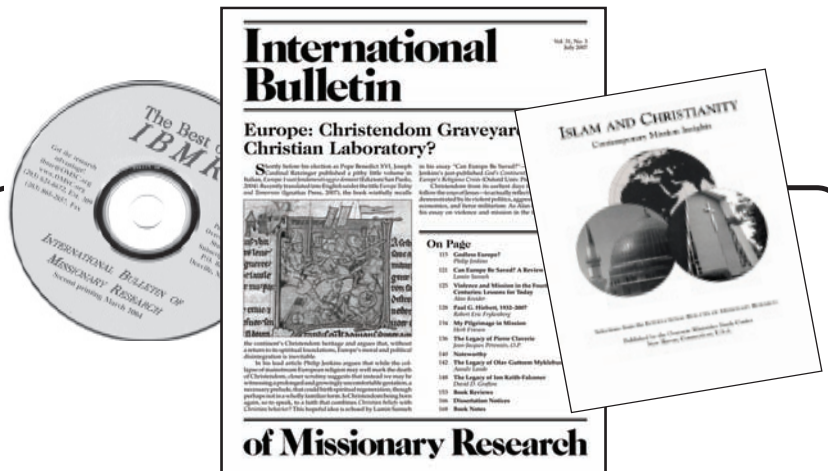
[2] Regarding the origin tales, Gupta rightly remarks that "Like the Brahman who must go back to the original division in the Purusasukta, each caste has its own theory explaining its origin" (in "Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes", Dipandar Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*, pp. 110-41, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991:121). On the basis of their origin tales, the villagers claim that they have descended from one or another of the Hindu gods (pp. 116-117). This point is seen in claims of Yadavas to be descendants from Krishna; "The unifying myth of Krishna not only tells of the origins

of the entire Yadav community, but also nullifies the hierarchy and 'cultural' differences existing within the community." Still further, modern politicians "Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav are at times described by their caste supporters as *avataras* (incarnations) of Krishna sent to earth to protect 'the oppressed' and promote social justice…" (Lucia Michelutti, pp. 60-61).

[3] The mainstream anthropological/sociological discourse on caste usually conceives it as a unified system that worked in more or less similar ways everywhere in India; it has invariably tended to emphasise the underlying cultural/ideological consensus across castes on its governing normative order. However, as scholars have repeatedly pointed out, Dumont constructed his theory of caste on the basis of some Hindu scriptural sources and did not care to look at the lived reality of caste.

[4] "Caste was the major pillar of Indology through which European-trained writers "essentialised" Indian peoples. The dissemination of these imagined essences not only denied Indians agency, but also justified European intervention in India" (ibid., p. 198).

[5] Vinay Katiyar, President of the UP state unit of the BJP, has launched a campaign to propagate the BJP's version of cultural nationalism by projecting Dr Ambedkar as anti-Muslim (*Amar Ujala*, 31 January 2003). (fn. 9, p. 217)