
UNIT 14 PROLIFERATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF CASTES AND JATIS

Structure

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14.0 INTRODUCTION

The term “Caste” comes from the Portuguese *casta*, which takes no account of *varna* but does encode ranks among status groups. We cannot advance one single acceptable definition for explaining the caste system. Caste can be viewed as a multifaceted status hierarchy composed of all members of society, with each individual ranked within the broad, fourfold class (*varna*, or color) divisions, or within the fifth class of untouchables—outcastes and the socially polluted. The fourfold caste divisions are Brahman (priests and scholars), Kshatriya or Chhetri (rulers and warriors), Vaisya (or Vaisaya, merchants and traders), and Sudra (farmers, artisans, and laborers). In each system, each caste (*jati*) is ideally an endogamous group in which membership is both hereditary and permanent. The only way to change caste status is to undergo Sanskritization. Sanskritization can be achieved by migrating to a new area and by changing one’s caste status and/or marrying across the caste line, which can lead to the upgrading or downgrading of caste, depending on the spouse’s caste. The term “caste” came to mean an ethnic group with a ranked position in social relations.

At the core of the caste structure is a rank order of values bound up in concepts of ritual status, purity, and pollution. Furthermore, caste determines an individual’s behavior, obligations, and expectations. All the social, economic, religious, legal, and political activities of a caste society are prescribed by sanctions that determine and limit access to land, position of political power, and command of human labor. Within such a constrictive system, wealth, political power, high rank, and privilege converge; hereditary occupational specialization is a common feature. Nevertheless, caste is functionally significant only when viewed in a regional or local context and at a particular time. The assumed correlation between the caste hierarchy and the socioeconomic class hierarchy does not always hold.

The term *jati* came to connote a specifically South Asian style of multi-cultural ethnic identity. The term could denote virtually any type, category, or group of people with similar characteristics, who tended to inter-marry, live together, engage in similar customs, worship alike, dress alike, eat similar food, speak alike, and be represented by group leaders. With this clarity about terms let now move across the landscape to sketch the context of territoriality of the early medieval in which the expansion and consolidation of the jatis took place.

14.1 THE CONTEXT

Early medieval social environments evolved over the centuries in the context of two long-term economic trends: sedentary farmers increased the productivity of land with

specialized labour and technology, and mobile groups extended transportation and communication by land and sea from South Asia to Central Asia, China, and the Mediterranean. Already by the seventh century, we can see that long arteries of human mobility across Eurasia were connected to regional veins in South Asia and to local capillaries running through expanding areas of agricultural production. Most new dynasties that sprang up in the first millennium developed in places where long trade routes crossed fertile valleys and deltas. For instance in Kashmir they surrounded Srinagar; and in Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley. In Punjab, they dotted the foothills. They multiplied along the rivers Ganga, Narmada, Tapti, Sabarmati, Mahanadi, Krishna, Godavari, Pennar, Kaveri, Vaigai, and Tambraparni. In the peninsula, they thrived most of all where rivers met the sea. In the flatlands of northern Sri Lanka, they expanded around irrigation reservoirs that received water running down from mountains in the centre of the island. In this vast area as the agrarian society spread along the river basin the uplands were still dominated by the pastoralists, and others.

New kinds of society came into being as medieval agrarian domains clashed with landscapes inhabited by nomads, hunters, and forest dwellers. Kings, Brahmins, and local landed elites led the drive to extend and protect the moral authority of *dharma*. For kings, peace and prosperity in their domains were definite signs of righteousness, as in Rama's kingdom in the *Ramayana*. Protecting *dharma* enabled royal families and local elites to form ranks of honour and spiritual merit that also disciplined the labour force, coordinated economic activities, and secured rights over landed property. Medieval texts on *dharma* do not insist that a king be a Kshatriya, and in much of the subcontinent, medieval caste (*jati*) ranks developed without the presence of all four *varnas*. Medieval texts, *sastras*, rather prescribe that the king's sacred duty — *rajadharma* — is to protect of local custom. Kings need to give grants of farmland to temples and Brahmins to express dynastic support for *dharma*, but they also had to protect local rights to land. Kings, Brahmins, and local landed elites had to work together to realize *dharma*. The spread of *jati* ranking as a feature of social life seems to have been propelled by ritual alliances among upwardly mobile groups. New dynastic realms were places where the building of ranking systems made good sense. Dynastic lineage leaders and Brahmins were critical actors in creating these systems of social difference, status, rank, and power. New societies came to include new social groups and institutions formed around models of behaviour, identity, aesthetics, and patronage codified in Sanskrit texts as Brahmins who sanctified social rank interpreted these locally. Rising families hired Brahmin genealogists and court poets, patronised Brahmin and temples, endowed feeding places for mendicants and pilgrimages, staged festivals, fed saints, and variously joined in activities that brought gods, priests, kings, and farmers into communion. People moved up in society by supporting and emulating Brahmins.

All this occurred as farmers expanded their control over land and labour and as populations of peasants, nomads, pastoralists, hunters, and forest tribes were slowly finding new social identities. Over many generations, people became high caste landowners, kings, protectors of *dharma*, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Superior Sudras, Inferior Sudras, untouchables, and aliens beyond the pale. Dominant agrarian castes came into being in different regions: Jats, Rajputs, Kunbis, Vellalas, Velamas, Reddys, Kapus, Nayars, and many, others. In this long process, ancient identities were lost. In ancient times, the Hoysala kings' ancestors were Melapas, hill chiefs in the Soseyur forests. Udaiyar and Yadava dynasties descended from herders. Tevar kings descended from Marava and Kallar hunters. Gurjaras and Rajputs had once been pastoral nomads. Places, too, acquired new identities, as they became known by the names of dynasties and of the local groups in control. Land became ethnically marked by traditions of group control. Dominant castes identified with dynastic territories that became their homelands. The only people who could be equally "at home" in all the lands of *dharma* were Brahmins

A small but significant set of inscriptions records opposition to Brahman settlements, to their collection of taxes, and to their claims on local resources like pastures. The authority of Hindu kingship spread slowly — often violently — into the vast spaces that lay outside its reach in early medieval centuries. In many instances, land grants appear to mark frontiers of royal power, and here resistance might be expected. Even where local society did accept the ritual and social status of Brahmans, fierce competitive struggles might flare up over land grants. In the ninth century, local conflicts of this kind accompanied new Brahman settlements on the Tamil coast. In the Rashtrakuta realm, inscriptions warn that violence and curses will be heaped upon opponents of Brahman land grants, and texts proclaim that people who murder Brahmans will be punished harshly, which implies that such murders did occur. Farming communities expanded agriculture in medieval domains by pushing pastoral nomads and forest cultivators away; but at the same time, herders, hunters, nomads, and other peoples also entered expanding agrarian societies, becoming labourers, farm-ers, craft producers, animal breeders and keepers, trans-porters, dairy producers, soldiers, traders, warriors, sorcerers, and kings. Agricultural territories included more diverse populations, not only different kinds of farmers — including peasants, landlords, and landless worker — but also non-farming groups who were essential for farming: artisans, cattle herders, hunters, transporters, traders, collectors of forest produce, well-diggers, priests, engineers, architects, healers, astrologers, and warriors. Without them, economies could not expand; their incorporation was an important social project.

In this context, warriors expanded their influence. Various factors promoted the rise of warrior power and one was certainly the increasing number of people with specialized military skills living in agrarian societies. Warriors with nomadic roots often became military specialists, most prominently, in Rajasthan and surrounding regions, where warrior dynasties emerged from the Gurjara Pratihara clans that conquered most of the Ganga basin after the eighth century.

14.2 THE FRAMEWORK FOR CONSOLIDATION

We thus find an entire range of political and social relationships being forged across the subcontinent in the early medieval state. Here in then lies the problem. We need to locate the proliferation of jatis either within the context of a ‘feudalism’ debate, which would then rule out the third urbanisation, or we need to perceive the early medievalism as a logical evolution of the processes that were unleashed in the early historical phase. Feudalism as a theoretical construct remains the most controversial construct in the debate on periodisation in Indian history. Decentralization and hierarchy characterize the new state structure. This is suggested by the presence of a wide range of semi autonomous rulers such as the Samantas, mahasamantas, mahamandalesvara and so on.

Further, the emergence of the landed intermediaries is considered the hallmark of Indian feudal social formation. This of course is linked with the disintegration and decentralization of state authority and with significant changes in the agrarian structures and relations of productions. The emergence of this landed gentry/intermediary is causally lined with what is now known as the land grant economy. The third reflection relates to the change in the nature of economy where the urban monetary economy gives way to ruralization and villages becoming self-sufficient. This also ushers in an ‘Urban Decay’, a hallmark of the feudal process. In the peasantry this results in something close to serfdom, characterized by immobility, forced labour and exorbitantly high rates of revenue. Taken together, these three points enumerate the feudal model that explains the state formation as well as the nature of state in early medieval India.

Another framework that has been suggested regarding the consolidation pertains to the so-called segementary state system advocated by Stein. Stein formally introduced his concept of ‘The Segementary State in South Indian History’ in the late seventies.

Stein's own terms clarify his own position. "In a segementary state sovereignty is dual. It consists of actual political sovereignty or control, and what Southhall terms "ritual hegemony" or ritual sovereignty". These correspond in the Indian usage to Ksatra and rajadharma respectively. In the segementary state there may be numerous centres of which one has primacy as a source of ritual sovereignty, but all exercise actual political control over a part or segment of the political system encompassed by the state. The specialized administrative staff what in some unitary states would be called the bureaucracy is not an exclusive feature of the primary centre, but is found operating at and within the segments of which the state consists. Subordinate levels or zones of the segementary state may be distinguished and the organization of these is pyramidal. That is the relationship between the centre and the peripheral units of any single segment is the same –in reduced form-as the relationship between the prime centre and all peripheral focuses of power... In the Indian context this principle is expressed in the terms little kingdoms and little kings to describe a local ruler whose kingly authority is that of any great king but more limited in scope."

Stein had applied his segementary state concept to the Chola State by the eighties he had applied to the Vijaynagar too. Stein's segementary state as a model is considered as an 'immensely powerful deconstructive tool' against the conventional theories. It is the most important contribution to the South Indian historiography since K.A.N. Sastri's work on the Cholas. Yet it is conceded that the segementary state cannot explain certain aspects of state formation in South India.

Criticisms of this model come from within the anthropological use of the term and its adoption by Stein to its outright rejection by both the Feudalism school and the votaries of integrated polity. Integrated polity looks at the issue of state formation as a process to be understood and explained rather than theorized. We can also look at the same process as an integrative, Processual and centralization process. This could be the third alternative framework to locate the issue of consolidation of jatis within the larger polity.

The process of integration implied a transformation of 'pre-state polities into state polities and thus the integration of local polities into structures that transcended the bounds of local politics. This integrative process was accompanied by a series of other initiatives, extension of agrarian society through peasantization of tribal groups, improvements in the trading networks, expansion of the Caste society and the emergence of spatial extensions of the ruling lineages by the processes of what Kulke calls Kshatriyaization or Rajputization. These measures affected the pre-modern state in two significant ways. The dynastic nuclear area came under bureaucratic control of the central lineage/dynasty. Secondly the politically controlled area expanded through a process of integration into its hinterland. In this the Samantas, the Rajas and the maha mandaleshvaras played a pivotal role, one that was played later on by the Yadava Bhosale's of Singhnapur of Maharashtra.

The religious institutions played a major role in this process of state formation. Of course the influence of religion on the polity was well known to the earlier generations of historians, but it was only after the feudalism and segementary state system model that this was properly internalised by the historians. Segementary state in fact argues for localized segementary structure of the state and its ritual sovereignty. In the second millennium AD there is a clear shift of the royal patronage from 'rural brahmana villages to the urban temple complexes and temple cities. This was to derive among other things a greater legitimacy for the rule and to exercise the ritual sovereignty.

This formulation of looking at the state formation in an evolutionary process is a departure from both the Feudalism model as well as that of the segementary state. The point of departure however does not lie in the feudalism or the segementary state either. It lies in the way periodisation is understood and operated in Indian history.

Strange though it may seem, these are not so contradictory positions as they may seem. The evolution of the processes unleashed could have taken a feudal form and content and it is also possible that they could have gone the other way. We do not have to subscribe to the view that there was a pan Indian mode of production across the sub-continent in the early medieval stage of sub-continent’s past. What might have existed would be a mesh of relationships at varying states of being. Most medieval dynasties combined elements of imperialism, regionalism, and localism. Many expanded like empires. All formed regions of competition and overlapping sovereignty. Early dynasties thrived on local support from core constituencies. The organization of political systems differed among regions and changed over time, but documents indicate general patterns. Most records depict transactions among people with titles in dynastic ranks and indicate that sovereignty emerged from these transactions rather than being dictated by legal or constitutional rules. Sovereignty consisted of honour and deference expressed in public interactions by people whose activity inscriptions record. Inscriptional transactions were mostly gifts, contracts, and commitments that individuals engaged to express respect and support for people they recognized publicly thereby as being superiors or subordinates. This complex economic web of relationships was understood in the form of what is now known as the ‘land grant economy’. We need to locate the issue of the consolidation of the jatis in this land grant economy, constricting if the feudalism argument is the analytical tool or expanding if we go by the theory of third urbanisation.

14.3 THE ISSUE OF PROLIFERATION

Caste — jati — defined units and idioms of family alliance and ranking within varna ideologies, but patriarchy also transcended caste and escaped the rule of dharma. Warrior kings connected disparate, distant territories to one another, and the rule of dharma could organise only parts of these expansive territories. In the sixth century, groups outside the ranks of caste society comprised the bulk of the population and though dharma did subsequently expanded its reach by various means, people outside caste society — whether beneath the lowest of the low or outside the pale altogether — remained numerous. Though excluded from temples and other rituals in respectable gentry communities, low castes and non-castes lived in agricultural territory. Because the power of caste society expanded downward from the top ranks and outward from centres of ritual and conquest, groups at the lowest ranks and on the margins of dominant caste control comprised a moving borderland between caste society and its surroundings. Outsiders in and around localities of high caste control were critically important for the vitality of every agrarian locality, and many did enter into the rituals of dharma in various ways, but many also remained outsiders. Such people continued to arrive in every agrarian territory with new waves of migration and conquest colonisation throughout the first and second millennium. Idioms and practices of patriarchal alliance allowed for the loose inclusion of countless within transactional territories formed by systems of market exchange and political ranking. Lineage and clan leaders among tribal groups, merchant patriarchs from distant places, travelling artisan headmen, nomadic chiefs, and military commanders from virtually any background could form alliances with locally dominant caste patriarchs based not on their caste ritual rank but rather on the mutual recognition of their respective patriarchal powers. Heads of households and heads of state could negotiate as patriarchs because they could rely on one another to command the labour and allegiance, assets and loyalty, of their kinfolk.

In the early medieval we come across a phenomenon where the existing caste groups/varnas do get broken down in into numerous castes and jatis. In the brahmana this process is manifest where many a brahmana castes were named after the type of ritual they performed. Here the growth of the land grant economy paved way for a larger fragmentation of the caste. In the land charters the brahmana are identified

by their gotras, male ancestors name, by the branch of learning and finally by the original home. If we look at the Maithili brahmana then their original homes or sub caste groups shot up to 1000. We can locate similar examples of other brahmana sub caste groups in the same vein.

The emergence of the Rajput identity gives us some idea of the new form the issue of proliferation took. The local communities/tribes such as the Bhils, Candelas and Palas and others gained the respectable Kshatriya lineage by the brahmana genealogists. This also paved way for the Bactrian Greeks, Sakas and the Parthians to be absorbed in this process of proliferation. This was an open ended process as we do find later the Hunas and the Gurjaras joining the ranks along with Caulukyias, Parmaras, Cahamanas and Tomaras.

This process of proliferation was not limited to the upper castes alone. We do find a major proliferation occurring in the other caste groups. A fifth century work mentions more than hundred caste groups. Works in the eighth century state that thousands of mixed caste came into existence due to a variety of reasons. The reasons could be conquest, spread of trade, expansion of agriculture and related activity etc. We do get references to the amalgamation of Sabaras, Bhillas and Pulinda in the medieval inscriptions of central India. This amalgamation was not always peaceful. There are references to violent conflicts occurring between the Abhiras and the others throughout the Deccan from the ninth to the thirteenth century. These conflicts were as much for political power as for a higher status in the new set up. Thus all the Abhira groups did not get absorbed in the high caste groups. Within the Abhiras too there were the lower sub caste groups and middle caste groups. Thus the situation of conflict was as much within as outside the caste groupings. In fact we do come across a phenomenon where the local tribal groups negotiated their status to gain space in the larger fold. This process of negotiation was sometimes violent and at other times through trade and exchange networks. Even in the process of amalgamation the *jatidharma* was left untouched and was strictly respected.

We also find another significant process that further advanced the process of proliferation of jatis. This was the process where the crafts were transformed into caste groups. The guilds and the trader groups, the *srenis* themselves acquired caste status and became closed groups. The head of a guild is often referred to as the *jetthaka* or *pamukkha* in early Buddhist literature. Often he is referred to after the occupation followed by the guild of which he was the head, e.g., 'head of garland makers' (*malakara jetthaka*), 'head of carpenters' guild' (*vaddhaki jetthaka*), etc. Apparently the Guild Head exercised considerable power over the members of his Guild. *Setthis* were merchant-cum-bankers and often headed merchant guilds. The guild head could punish a guilty member even to the extent of excommunication. It appears that normally headship of a guild went to the eldest son. Succession is mentioned only after the death of the head and not in his lifetime, which would suggest that the head remained in office life-long. The evidence of two Damodarpur Copper-plate inscriptions of the 5th century AD shows that one Bhupala held the office of *nagarasreshthi* for well nigh half a century, supports this.

We can also locate the emergence of local crafts into castes groups as mixed castes such as the *napita*, *tambulika*, *citrakara*, *svarnakara*, *malakara*, *modaka*, and many others. These obviously were various crafts where the people involved in those crafts emerged as new jatis in the mixed caste group. We do get references to crafts villages such as the *Kumbharapadraka* that belonged to the potters.

Along with the crafts the religious affiliation too played a role in the proliferation of jatis. The emergence of various sects had close affinity with the jatis they emerged from and the gods they worshipped. This process was linked to the state formation as well.

Each brahmanical sect was linked as it were to a head who demanded allegiance to him. The Lingayats and the Virashaivas are an extremely good example of this phenomenon. It is indeed ironical that those who sought to remove the caste system themselves were absorbed in the same.

Thus the caste groups consolidated, either in a feudal mode or in an integrated emerging polity across the length and breadth of the sub-continent. This consolidation was not limited to the higher caste groups alone but as a phenomenon was experienced across the entire social spectrum. Let us now look at the major learnings that we can derive from this process.

14.4 SUMMARY

The process of consolidation and proliferation of the caste and jati was initiated in the early historical phase as the urbanisation spread in the sub-continent under the Mauryan imperium. This process was consolidated in the early medieval context. It engulfed the agrarian as well as the non-agrarian groups such as the pastoralists, the gatherers hunters and the forest dwellers.

The process was not limited to the higher caste groups alone as has been observed above, but was certainly geared to gain a high caste status in order that wealth and power could be obtained and legitimised. The high ranking in the caste group went with resultant wealth and power. The process was certainly hierarchical in nature and sought to legitimise the power and the wealth of the high caste groups. Thus these social changes can be understood against the framework of feudalism or integrated polity, where for both it was essentially the growth of the local, and the regional.

14.5 GLOSSARY

- Hierarchy of Caste** : By hierarchy of caste it is meant here in the sense of what Louis Dumont called the hierarchy of purity and pollution which the caste system consists of. In this sense castes are ordered according to the perception of purity or pollution they are ascribed with.
- Sanskritisation** : This term was coined by the eminent sociologist M. N. Srinivas. This term meant that castes of lower order and ranking aspired to a higher ranking and often moved up within the caste hierarchy.

14.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Analyse the context in which we can debate the issue of consolidation of the jatis and castes.
- 2) Was the proliferation of castes and jatis limited to the upper castes alone?
- 3) Was this proliferation wide spread or limited to one particular region of the sub-continent?