



Research Paper

Beyond the Seamless Web: The Decline of Caste in Fiji

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a historical account from a sociological vantage point. It contextualizes the history of Indian immigration to Fiji in the light of the cessation of Fiji to the British Crown 1874. This is when the British colonial government introduced Indians on the plantations as indentured labourers. Though the system of indenture was wound up in 1920, most Indians stayed on in Fiji in rural communities as small farmers. The paper suggests that even though the circumstances in Fiji were on the whole favourable to the reconstitution of the caste system, the system of caste disintegrated to a large extent. To this end, the paper seeks to portray the aspect of caste as it informed the lives of the Indian settlers, especially during the early period. In particular, it focusses on the fundamental features of the caste system, that is, aspects of hierarchy, pollution, commensality, endogamy and occupation. It argues that simplification of Hindu religious traditions and the existential conditions in an overseas land, led to the discarding of various traditional practices in social interactions. However, two features of the caste system that survived were the ritual prerogatives of the Brahmins and the influence of caste status on marriage.

KEYWORDS: Fiji, Indenture, Caste, Overseas Indians, Pollution, Diaspora

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I. INTRODUCTION

Fiji comprises of a group of 503 islands scattered over 90,000 square miles in the south west Pacific Ocean. Of these, only 106 are inhabited, Viti Levu being the largest and the most densely populated. Discovered by Abel Tasman, these islands soon became home to European settlers who immigrated to Fiji and became plantation owners. The local Fijian tribal chief, Seru Cakabau ceded Fiji to Great Britain in 1874. The history of Indian immigration to Fiji should be seen in the light of the cessation of the island group to the British Crown.

Since the supply of the Fijian labour was insufficient for the plantations and since the planters were not in a position to import Indian labour, it was left to the British government to introduce Indian labourers on the plantations. Indians were indentured to work in the sugar plantation and mills which were started in Fiji by the Australia based Colonial Sugar Refining Company from 1879 and continued till the end of 1919 (Kumar 2012: 1053).

The first shipload of Indians arrived in Fiji in 1879. By 1907, there were 31,000 Indians in Fiji (Cumpston 1956: 159). These immigrants were introduced to the plantations through the indenture system. Villagers in large numbers were recruited from Northern India, especially the United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh), Bihar and the Madras Presidency (D'Souza 2001: 1071). Interpreters were used to convince and dubious and fraud means were used to recruit simple village folk who then had to testify before a magistrate that they understood the terms of the contract or agreement, often referred to as *girmit*.

Once transported to Fiji, they faced arduous conditions in the sugar plantations and lead miserable lives in pathetic conditions. They were housed in long sheds, partitioned into tiny cubicles with practically no ventilation and sanitation facilities. The death rate among the indentured labourers was reported to be high and many committed suicide out of sheer desperation (D'Souza 2001: 1073). The horrors of indenture was well known in India and as the nationalist pressure mounted against the system, it was stopped in 1920.

Under this system, the immigrants entered an agreement to work on the plantations for five years after which they received a certificate of residence. If they worked another five years at the plantation, they were entitled to a paid ticket to return home. But most Indian took a limited extent of land on lease from native Fijians, started farming, and stayed on (Kumar 2012: 1063).

The aim of this paper is to portray the aspect of caste as it informed the lives of the Indian settlers in Fiji. In particular, it focusses on aspects of hierarchy, pollution, commensality, endogamy and occupation, especially during the early period and thus presenting a historical account from a sociological view point.

II. RELIGION AND CASTE

The statistics of caste as compiled by Gillion in the period 1879-1916 shows that 16.1 percent of the immigrants were Brahmins and other high castes, the agricultural castes made up 31.3 percent, 6.7 per cent belonged to the artisan castes, while 31.2 per cent were the so-called low castes and outcastes (Gillion 1962: 152). The rest were Muslims and Christians. This paper concentrates on caste among the Hindus.

From the outset, the Hindu population was dominated by orthodox Sanathan Dharmis, only a handful being Arya Samajis. According to Lal, the main reason for Sanathan Dharma to become predominant was the easy accessibility to Tulsi Das's *Ramayana* to Hindus of all denominations (Lal 1977: 76). The simple Hindi of *Ramayana* could easily be comprehended by the people and thus became their basic religious text. Moreover, the indentured labourers and their immediate descendants connected their lives to the story of Ram through the theme of banishment. They were far from home, undergoing great hardships and were suffering the atrocities by plantation overseers, just as Ram was banished, and had to confront several hardships and atrocities (Kelley 1988: 48). Willard reports that Hinduism in Fiji was primarily a bhakti or devotional practice rather than actual knowledge and understanding of the tenets of the religion (Willard 2018: 229). This led to the simplification of Hindu religious traditions.

The mission of Arya Samaj, founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 in India, organized itself in Fiji in 1902. The main emphasis of Arya Samaj was a communal upliftment through the eradication of the caste system, *purdah* (the veil), *sati* (widow burning) and child marriage from the society. They attacked the myths and stories of Hindu epics, considering them to be "illegitimate accretions in to pure Vedic Hinduism" (Kelley 1988: 47). One of the aims of the Arya Samaj in Fiji was the reconversion of those Indians who had strayed from the Hindu fold to other faiths. It founded schools for Indians and was devoted to proselytizing them.

2.1 Caste Hierarchy and Commensality

In Fiji, the plantation system did not enable the maintenance of caste hierarchy as a system. People were well acquainted with the traditional ranking of caste and the polar opposition that existed between Brahmins and the so-called untouchables. But the relevance of these concepts diminished largely due to the indenture experience, where labourers were huddled in gangs and forced to work together irrespective of caste considerations. In fact, Ali reports that Indian immigrants lost their caste even before boarding the ship in the depots of Kolkata and Chennai where rules of commensality were unenforceable and a shortage of women led to marital alliances that cut across caste and religion (Ali 1977: 1783).

Caste hierarchy was also of little significance because of the practice of assuming higher caste names by the so-called lower castes during the time of immigration. Jayawardena cites examples of the adoption of higher caste names, and asserts that, "the existence of counterfeit claims has undermined the authenticity of hereditary rank" (Jayawardena 1971: 101). Caste "passing" was common and Mayer writes that, "Indians were known to claim and assume higher caste status on arrival" (Mayer 1957: 325). The higher caste status did not dictate social interaction as such, but granted prestige especially while forming marital alliances.

Brahmins were accorded deference, only if they happened to be priests, but not all priests were Brahmins. Participation in religious ritual ceremonies was not in terms of caste status. The priest could belong to any caste and was chosen partly because of his ability to bring people together and partly because people believed that he was endowed with supernatural powers

Taboos governing social dining among members of different castes did not exist and the Fijian Indian community did not impose any public restriction on commensality. People ate what others cooked at feasts and in restaurants and in their homes. The lack of commensal restriction in Fiji could also be attributed to the drinking of *yaqona*, a kava, which dominated the social lives of men in rural Fiji (Tomilson 2007: 1066). This was freely available in country stores and men often assembled there and drank from the same bowls. Since these stores belonged to all castes, the custom of drinking *yaqona* was responsible to a large extent in putting an end to commensal restrictions.

2.2 Pollution

The significance of the notion of purity and impurity had diminished considerably in Fiji as the belief in permanent or habitual pollution had died out. Each family cleansed its own lavatory and washed its own clothes. Corpses were washed and prepared for the funeral by relatives and friends.

Ritual purity and impurity were associated not hereditarily, but with acts, events and objects. For example, menstruating women, mourners from families with a recent death, and meat eaters were considered ritually polluting (Willard 2018: 230). A so-called low caste person intending to participate in a ritual ceremony

could be purified if he had a bath, prayed, and fasted. At the same time, a Brahmin who did not go through these purifying acts remained polluted. Thus, the ability and the right to attain purity were open to all, provided they followed ritual prescriptions.

Pollution ideas concerning food, existed only regarding beef which was universally avoided. Jayawardena reports that people ate goat, chicken and mutton and consumed alcohol. Abstinence from alcoholism and meat eating did not confer any superior status upon anybody (Jayawardena 1971: 104).

2.3 Caste Endogamy

Caste differences in Fiji were emphasized most strongly in marriage. Most Indians preferred that their children marry someone of the same caste status. Along with caste, the social standing, occupation, wealth and education of the spouse were also taken into consideration. Wealth and occupation were the overriding factors in most of the alliances. The study by Schwartz of the Fiji Indians shows that only 44 per cent of the marriages were endogamous, 40 per cent were exogamous and 16 per cent were incomplete, where the caste identity of one or more of the spouses was not known (Schwartz 1967: 221). This suggests an existence of a moderately high rate of exogamous unions and the proliferation of inter-caste marriages. However, the inter-caste marriages that were contracted were mostly between castes of similar rank, and marriages between persons of widely disparate castes were few and far between.

Caste restrictions on marriage were observed strictly when marriages were contracted locally. The status of each family was publicly known and the family head was reluctant to forge an alliance with a family of ill repute and with whom relations were strained. But when the practice of marrying outside the locality developed in the 1960s and the 1970s, the caste rank of potential partners lost much of its significance. Caste differences were now ignored in favour of other considerations or benefits. According to Schwartz, adherence to caste practices appeared to coincide most closely with individual preferences rather than any specific group. More important than adherence to caste endogamy was the concern among the Indians in Fiji to maintain an "ethnic group endogamy." Religious endogamy was exercised and inter-faith marriages were rare. Not one of the informants in the study by Schwartz was married to Fijians, Europeans or Muslims (Schwartz 1967: 234). However, a contrary view has been offered by Brown, whose study shows that a rise in caste population led to an increase in the practice of endogamy. She suggests that that population growth encouraged a desire to follow ideal marriage rules among large groups of the Indian population in Fiji (Brown 1981: 314).

2.4 Occupation

Caste based occupations and the tradition of acquiring occupations by birth did not exist in the economic organization of the Indian community in Fiji. Only the priest inherited his occupation, but since priestcraft was not very remunerative, most priests were also storekeepers and farmers. Thus, economic power was valued the most and interest in making money could weaken avoidance of traditionally polluting occupations. In accordance with this principle, many people took to the lucrative task of washing clothes during the second world war, when the American troops were stationed near the villages of Wainikore and Raralevu (Jayawardena 1971: 107).

There was a complete disassociation between caste and occupation. High caste farmers raised pigs, Brahmins painted houses and individuals who did not belong to the *nao* caste became barbers. Occupational specialists such as teachers, carpenters and tailors could belong to any caste.

The Brahmin pundits maintained the supremacy in the religious sphere. In order to counteract the proselytization designs of Christian missionaries, they performed birth, marriage and death ceremonies for all Hindus regardless of caste. Contrary to the prevailing practice in India, they accepted food, water and alms from all sects and castes. It was due to their efforts that Hindus were made to feel as members of one community (Lal 1977: 76).

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even though the circumstances in Fiji were on the whole favourable to the reconstitution of the caste system as many Indians stayed on in rural communities as small farmers after the indenture period was over, yet the system of caste disintegrated to a large extent. Only some degree of social prestige was attached to people of higher castes. Rules relating to occupations, food habits, marriage, festivals, dress and even language underwent transformation (Cato 1955: 31). Ramesh reports that some peasants saw the indenture labour system as an opportunity to escape the hardships caused by famine and the rigid hierarchies of the caste system and its oppression in late nineteenth century India (Ramesh 2017: 70).

The model of a pure-impure hierarchy, which is the cornerstone of the caste system, ranked individuals but did not differentiate social groups. Power and a limited range of social relations are variables in the persistence of the caste system. But all legitimate sanction power was concentrated in the government and company administrations. There was no devolution of power to any person or group in the Indian rural society.

Ali reports that caste had lost much of its meaning, and existed only as a matter of convenience and expediency and was resurrected only if some material gain could be had from its display (Ali 1977: 1787).

Two features of the caste system that survived in many overseas Indian communities were the ritual prerogatives of the Brahmins and the influence of caste status on marriage. This was also the case in Fiji. It might be said that these two features constituted the essence of the caste system, but it is equally true that the two phenomena by themselves do not constitute a coherent whole. It would be fitting to conclude this paper by quoting Jayawardana (1971: 115) who sums it up succinctly: "What persists of the caste system is a thing of shreds and patches and not the seamless web it was in the ancestral society."

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