

Brahmanism as Ruling Ideology in Constructing Social Practices: A Study on the Select Autobiographies of the Dalits and Tribals

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Abstract

In ancient India, the socio-political ideology 'Brahmanism' which originated from Vedic religious texts such as *Shrutis*, *Smritis*, *Gita*, by birth created rules and restrictions for all *Varnas* and also prescribed all inhuman and unethical laws against the lower castes based on the religious concept of 'purity' and 'pollution', to keep Brahmins in the dominant position forever. It forbade exogamy, inter-dining, and encouraged important characteristics such as social order (superior –inferior), heredity, endogamy, family occupation, *Dvija* (twice-born), *Samsara* (reincarnation), and *Karma* (action) which have been constructed as a practice, tradition, culture of Hindu society for centuries. The present research article critically examines Brahmanism and its major characteristics are constructed as ruling ideology inflicted upon the marginalized to follow as their practices, way of life, culture and tradition. Furthermore, this article attempts to bring out the marginalized's consequences of violating Brahmanism.

Keywords: brahmanism, purity-pollution, exogamy, endogamy, family occupation

Introduction

In ancient India, the socio-political ideology 'Brahmanism' which originated from Vedic religious texts of the *Shrutis* (Vedas) and *Smritis* (Vedic scripture) by birth, created rules and restrictions for all *Varnas* with Brahmins having the highest status and Shudras and Untouchables having lowest. Furthermore, this ideology prescribed all inhuman and unethical laws against the lower castes based on the religious concept of 'purity' and 'pollution to keep Brahmins in the dominant position forever. it also prohibited exogamy, inter-dining, and encouraged important characteristics such as social order as superior –inferior, endogamy, family occupation, *Dvija* (twice-born), *Samsara* (reincarnation) and *Karma* (action) that have been practiced as a culture of Hindu society for centuries. It was imposed to protect the *Varnashrama dharma*, which was being propagated through the Vedic religious texts. The theory of Karma developed by Brahmins with the help of Hindu religion to deter low castes and other exploited classes from revolting against Brahmanism led them to believe that if they performed the prescribed duties obediently and willingly, they would be born as caste Hindus in their next birth.

The present research article entitled “Brahmanism as Ruling Ideology in Constructing Social Practices: A Study on the Select Autobiographies of the Dalits and Tribals” critically examines how Brahmanism and its major characteristics are constructed as ruling ideology inflicted upon the marginalized to follow as their practises, way of life, culture and tradition. Four autobiographies of the marginalized were chosen for this study. They are Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), K.A.Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (2009), *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K.Janu* (as told to) by Bhaskaran (2003) and *Mayilamma: The life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (as told to) by Jothibai Pariyadath (2006). Furthermore, this research study highlights the consequences of the marginalized people violating Brahmanism.

Throughout Indian history, philosophers and reformers such as Buddha, Chokamela, Tukaram, Kabir, Phule, Ayothi Thass, Periyar, Narayana Guru, and Ambedkar have questioned Brahmanism. The first revolutionist Buddha challenged Vedanta philosophy and the power of Vedas, preaching his philosophies against Hindu society and advocating a casteless and classless society, but his philosophies were eventually defeated. Hinduism developed caste distinctions as Buddhism declined. Jotiba Phule attempted to demystify Hindu concepts by portraying Lord Brahma as a stereotypical Brahmin who not only fought against Indian natives but also wrote Vedic religious texts to protect Brahmins. He writes, “Brahma... conquered our ancestors here and enslaved them (turned them into slaves). He imposed numerous iniquitous regulations on natives. Following Brahma's death, the Aryans became known as 'Brahmins' superseding their previous name – Aryans”. (4)

Ambedkar fought against the caste system, untochability, orthodox rituals and customs of Hindu society, as well as to establish a new society based on French Revolution (1789) ideology of “liberty, equality and fraternity”. It is impossible to create an equal state unless the caste system is abolished. Thus Ambedkar advocated for a few concepts such as reservation, inter-caste, inter-religious, marriage, inter-dining, and religious conversions in order to eliminate the caste system.

Social order

In Hindu tradition, the social order (higher and lower) is associated with not only human beings but also objects such as profession, clothes, colour, habitation, deity, age, sex, character, animal, direction, and so on, all of which are assigned a high or low status based on the concept of purity and pollution. Hygiene was also linked ritually to karma, birth, caste, and reincarnation. As a result, Brahmins are the pure caste, while untouchables are the impure caste; in animals, the cow, milk, and urine are pure, but its dung is polluted; and the dog and pig are polluted, while cow dung is pure when compared to untouchable. Vegetables are pure in food, whereas beef and pork are polluted. The parts of the human body above the waist are pure, while the parts below the waist are impure. According to the Rig Veda, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas were born above the waist, Shudras below the waist and women, ati-Shudras, untouchables, and tribes were not born from Brahma's body. As a result, Brahmanism has always treated women, dalits, and tribals as inferior and polluted.

Beef and pork are considered unclean in Hinduism, but they are delicious foods for Dalits. Pigs have always played important roles in Dalits' lives, including sickness, health, death, weddings, and religious ceremonies, which would be incomplete without them. However, *chuhra* people in Joothan avoid eating pork because Caste Hindus have indirectly insisted that they do so. Valmiki was found out when his Master Sahib asked, "How many pieces of pork did you eat? You must have eaten at least half a pound" (21). All the boys teased him "Abey Chuhra, you eat pork"(21). Many Tyagi boys ate pork in secret at Bhangi (dalit) basti at night and were not teased. Caste Hindus continue to believe that eating pork pollutes the environment therefore they ate without caring about pollution. Valmiki says "Pitaji...had offered TejaTaja country liquor that day and pork sucking at the pork slices, his face had resembled a spotted dog's" (21-22). Both Tagas and *Chuhras* ate pork, but when caste Hindus ate pork that was not polluted, while Dalits ate, it was said polluted. It shows that caste Hindus deliberately propagated the myth that eating pork was polluted. Caste society only decided which foods dalits should consume that could be considered polluted but these are same food eaten by caste Hindus called under a different name. Deepa Tak says "... If I eat pig meat, I am marked a pig-eater. If an upper caste person eats it, it becomes pork, the rich man's delicacy". The caste society believes that whatever foods dalit consume are polluted or eat dirty foods because they are Dalits. (Vikaram)

Tribals eat non-vegetarian foods and actively consume meat products to survive in harsh weather conditions and perform more physical labour; eating meaty dishes provides them with more nutrients than vegetarian foods. Adiyar tribal members in Mother Forest typically consume non-vegetarian foods such as fish, crab, and snail. Janu says, "We used to catch fish in the stream gushing by while our elders toiled in the fields or snare water snakes. To catch crabs we need to make a noose at the end of thick blade of muttal in it as bit" (2-3). When tribals had mucus in their lungs, they would eat crabs as medicine. Nowadays, poisonous crabs are available in the town market due to fertilizers and pesticides used in agriculture. The country crabs were once more tasty and nutritious because no poisonous fertilizers or pesticides were used in the fields,. The only fertilizers were cow dung, decayed leaves, and ash.. Mayilamma says "Crabs in the fields these days must have become 'poison crabs' so they feed on chemical! That is why they do not taste as good as they did once" (31).

In India, the majority of the population became Hindus, and they were expected to follow its code, which had a significant impact on Dalits and tribal foods. Because Dalits and Tribals were outside the Hindu religious social structure, they were allowed to eat meat, particularly beef and pork. Still, when they were absorbed into Hinduism and caste society, their non-vegetarian food was considered polluted. In India, caste has only become a major factor in determining the population's food habits.

Manual jobs

In Indian societies, the profession was predetermined based on the *Chaturvarna* system in which the Brahmins, were assigned superior work such as learning and teaching, while Shudras, Dalits and Tribals were assigned inferior work such as sweeping, cleaning and scavenging to be performed as services to all three classes. The practice of manually cleaning faeces from toilets and open drainage continues across India, even though the Indian state

prohibited manual scavenging, the old feudal and caste-based custom imposed on dalits, especially women to work as 'manual scavengers' continues across India. They continue to collect human waste in cane baskets or metal troughs, carry it away on their heads and dispose of it outside of the village.

Women are assigned to clean dry toilets, while men clean sewers and septic tanks. Jasbir, Valmiki's uncle, worked as a cleaner in the sanitary department of the Dehra Dun municipality. He also worked at eight or ten homes as cleaner, removing garbage, cleaning lavatories, and sweeping streets (22). When Dalits refused to work in polluted environments, they were met with hostility from Hindu castes. Women in the Uttar Pradesh village of Parigama, Mainpuri district, faced violence for refusing to engage in manual scavenging. The upper caste men of Thakur threatened the people of Parigama village by sending their women to clean toilets "if you don't start sending your women to clean toilets, we will beat them up... we will not let you live in peace"(Menon). Manual cleaning of human faeces is not a form of employment but rather an injustice akin to slavery. It is the most heinous form of discrimination and a violation of human rights.

According to the *Chaturvarna* system, Brahmins were forbidden from performing any surgical work because it was considered polluted. Still, today they are masters of all surgical jobs in the medical field, particularly sawing the corps, which is a violation of Brahmanism. The caste Hindus argued that professions should not be assigned based on caste, but in contrast, they obtained a court ruling that Brahmins should be the only priests in all Hindu temples, according to *agams* (tradition). It appears that dalits are only required to follow caste rules because Brahmins desire to be pure caste in Hindu society.

Tribal groups lived their lives by doing manual labour such as hunting, gathering food, and cultivating because they relied on the forest for survival. Outsiders later forced tribal people to convert the forest into cultivable land. Mayilamma says "Cleaning the undergrowth and setting it on fire felling the big trees, chopping their trunks and digging up their roots, building ridges and making the soil ready for agriculture were back breaking tasks"(M 13). The landlords did not intervene until the forest was cleared and prepared for cultivation, and tribals were assigned only agricultural work. The Adiyar tribals did all agricultural work in the Warriors' fields in Mother Forest. Janu observes, "Only after sowing germinating tilling transplanting weeding watering standing guard reaping carrying threshing and making mounds of grain would the jenmi make his appearance until then his men came"(15) Tribals were not paid a living wage for their labour, causing them to migrate to non-tribal areas in search of better opportunities, only to be forced to work as bonded labourers. According to Janu, "the men would get only seven sers of rice and a piece of coarse clothing. They had to work as a slave for a whole year"(36). Tribals never objected to their enslavement because Jenmi was their sole provider of all works. There was no way out of their manual labour until the very end.

The government initiated many projects such as mining, irrigation, power, and industries to provide better jobs for tribals, but they were only assigned manual labour. Mayilamma says "The job of cleaning bottles! What could we tell them when they asked us what other jobs could be given to uneducated?" (11-12). Non-tribals benefited more from all development projects than

tribals, who migrated for better jobs. Still, displacement and forced migration forced them to be contract labourers in industry and domestic workers in cities. Currently, one out of every two tribal families relies on manual labour for a living (Report). According to Hinduism, the current birth of women, untouchables, and other working people is to work as a slave and to survive through physical labour. Women, Dalits, and Tribals were cursed because of sin committed in their previous birth. It implies that Hinduism provides a better life for those who are not involved in labour and a worse life for those who are (Gouthaman)

Endogamy

Endogamy is defined as “marriage within a specific group as required by custom or law” by Merriam Webster. Exogamy, or marriage outside one's caste, creed, ethnicity, or religion, has been strictly prohibited in Hinduism for centuries. Manus assures “Through sexual misconduct between classes, through (knowledge of women who should not be known and through rejection of one's own innate activity), (sons) of confused class are born. (237). Endogamy is defined as “marriage within a specific group as required by custom or law” by Merriam Webster. Exogamy, or marriage outside one's caste, creed, ethnicity, or religion, has been strictly prohibited in Hinduism for centuries. “Through sexual misconduct between classes, knowledge of women who should not be known, and rejection of one's own innate activities”, Manus assures, “(sons) of confused class are born”(237). The superimposition of endogamy over exogamy is the primary cause of caste consolidation, which divided the population into fixed and definite units. Each caste was prevented from fusing with another by the custom of endogamy. As a result, endogamy became a distinguishing feature of Brahmanism, based on religiously governed principles of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’. It was purely political motivations that drove the Aryans to divide the people hierarchically “maintain the purity of their blood” from indigenous Dravidians. As a result, the caste system arose due to political motivation, which was later reinforced by religious sanctions: color-conscious Aryans, who saw themselves as culturally superior, were concerned about maintaining the purity of their blood. (Ram).

Exogamy is strictly prohibited, though endogamy of caste has been practiced among them, and those who violate exogamy face harsher penalties than those who violate endogamy. Ambedkar says “A Man of one the first three castes (who commits adultery) with a woman of the Shudra caste shall be banished”(59). At the same time, any Shudra men who marry women from all three superior castes should be severely punished. Manus says “if a man of the rear castes makes love with a virgin of the highest caste, he should be given corporal or capital punishment; if he makes love with a virgin of the same caste as his own, he should pay the bride price, if her father wishes it” (191)

Endogamy was later practiced by all castes, sub-castes, classes, religious, and ethnic groups, resulting in self enclosed or endogamous groups. Exogamy is still considered a sin because it violates the *Chaturvarna* system, pollutes the blood of caste Hindus, and brings dishonour to the elite and religion. In Scar, Michael Amma from the Pallar (Dalit) and the boy from Udayar (high caste) fell in love but were not allowed to marry because Michael Amma asked him “Will your people allow me to live if I get married to you?. Even if we elope, your people will destroy my presents and my entire clan. Forget me and marry a girl in your own

caste and live in peace” (37). It was too difficult for them to marry and live outside of the caste. Fear drove her lover to murder Michael Amma right away. Her lover explained “The village high caste people, wanting to safeguard caste, would round up the couple who lived in the town and finish them off quietly” (39).

As a result of Michael Amma's murder, there were no inter-caste marriages in their area. People were even hesitant to fall in love within their caste. Of course, Thangarasu and Tamilarasi from the Dalits community loved each other in Thovoor, but they couldn't marry for more than fifteen years. Finally, they married and moved to London after Michael Amma's murder devastated the entire community. When people of the same caste face so many obstacles in their love marriage, it is impossible to engage in inter-caste marriage, especially if the boy is from a lower caste and the girl is from a higher caste. If the boy is from a Dalit family, he will be killed for only polluting the purity of blood of caste Hindus. It is now referred to as “honour killing”.

According to a Supreme Court ruling on honour crimes from 2014 to 2016, 288 cases of honour killings were registered. According to the NGO Evidence, 187 cases of caste-based killings were reported in Tamil Nadu between 2012 and 2017 (Honor), with most cases involving an upper-caste woman married to a Dalit man. Many of such killings were registered as suicide or not reported, with few going to court (Chandran). Kausalya from the dominant community (Thevar) and Shankar (Dalit) were attacked in 2015 for their inter-caste marriage, but Shankar died on the spot while Kausalya escaped. It was the first 'Honor Killing' case on the NCRB's crime list (Srividya). People are less open to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages nowadays, even though matrimonial websites boast of having a separate matrimonial website for each caste and religion. According to caste, class, and religious customs, most people look for a bride or bridegroom within their own caste or community to marry.

Marriage is a social institution distinct from Hindu society in tribal communities. It is a social contract and companionship, not a religious sacrament. The pattern of tribal marriage, ceremonies, taboos, and marriage dissolution rules differs from civilized society. Tribal society has marriage rules and regulations prohibiting sexual relationships and marriage between specific kin, family, clan, *gotra*, and village. It occasionally encourages marriages between blood relatives. There is a preference for marrying distinct kin in such cases. Exogamy is the practise of marrying outside of one's family, clan, group, or village. Eravallar tribal people in Kerala practise this. Mayilamma married off her daughter to someone from another clan. She says “... we belonged to a clan called Rajan Kulam, My husband Marimuthu belonged to the Chembutan Kulam. The children come under the father's clan”(43).

Exogamy was strictly enforced by Eravallar tribal groups back then, who believed that marrying within the same clan was equivalent to marrying a brother and a sister. Their forefathers used to select brides by strictly adhering to clan rules, but tribals no longer do so. Mayilamma had six children, but only one son married according to clan rules, and the rest never married. Mayilamma writes “Supramani, my youngest son was the only one who followed the clan rules for marriage. Rajamma from Thothichipathy is his wife”(42 With the exception of Subramani, none of them ever followed the clan rules for marriage. Exogamy is practiced because it is difficult to obtain food in hunting and food gathering societies where women and

children are a burden, particularly in hunting where female infanticide is common, resulting in a female shortage. (Chandrakantha).

Some tribal groups practice endogamy, which means marriage within their own clan or group. Endogamy is practiced due to a lack of communication with other tribes, fear of seeing strangers or others, and the desire to maintain their own distinct socio-cultural identity from others. In recent years, some tribal groups have violated the practice of endogamy by marrying lower castes to be absorbed into Hinduism, which has changed their marriage practice. Mayilamma married in the way that caste Hindus do "...the groom would tie the *thali* around the bride's neck and take her home" (48). Hinduism forced tribal groups to abandon their traditions and culture. In fact, one person's view of what constitutes a natural sexual relationship may differ from another person's view of what constitutes the most natural custom. All moral or accepted behaviour rules are man-made like artificial.

Brahmins seized power based on possession and rights, ensuring their dominance for all time. In short, the system of exploitation and class distinction in this country was religiously justified and built its dominance strongly in the subconscious of Hindus, who began to analyze everything from the perspective of purity and pollution and had been structured by language and culture. Caste Hindus practise Brahmanism to ensure purity, and they have imposed several restrictions on the marginalized to keep them from culturally integrating into the mainstream. This was accomplished through religion, customs, and societal norms. Caste purity was so crucial to caste Hindus that they prevented the marginalized from integrating with them.

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