

Multiple Reality In Social Context Of Caste Degradation Of Viswakarmas

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Abstract

Discriminatory and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of a vast global population has been justified on the basis of caste. In much of Asia and parts of Africa, caste is the basis for the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups by reason of their descent. Over 250 million people worldwide continue to suffer under what is often a hidden apartheid of segregation, modern-day slavery, and other extreme forms of discrimination, exploitation, and violence. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to their full attainment of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Caste denotes a system of rigid social stratification into ranked groups defined by descent and occupation. Under various caste systems throughout the world, caste divisions also dominate in housing, marriage, and general social interaction—divisions that are reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and even physical violence. Among the communities discussed in this article are the crafts people of Kerala commonly known as Viswakarmas. The craftsmen inculcate the culture of creativity by disseminating their accumulated knowledge for the benefit of the community, sharing values of their art among themselves and entailing a cultural living for the fellow beings. Viswakarmas are the traditional crafts community of India. The five subgroups of Viswakarma community: carpenters (Maya), blacksmiths (Manu), bronze smiths (Tvashtara), goldsmiths (Daivagya) and stonemasons (Shilpi) are said to be the descendants of Lord Viswakarma and these skills are heavily used in all forms and works of life from agriculture, industries to services. Because of the dominance of Brahmins and their superiority nature Viswakarmas were degraded as pollutant class in social ladder.

Key words: Caste, Stratification, Craftspeople, Viswakarmas, Brahmanisation

Introduction

Caste as a system of social stratification was an encompassing system in the past. There was reciprocal system of exchange goods and services. With time, occupation and mode of generation of livelihood of various caste groups changed, and the traditional form of jajmani system fizzled out. This paper provides an account of multiple realities in the contextual degradation of caste stratification of the Viswakarma community. The discourse of caste has been shifted from ritual hierarchy and social discrimination to an instrument to mobilize people for economic and political gain. Caste has been discussed in classical Hindu texts, in micro level ethnographic accounts, and in large-scale surveys of attitudes and perceptions, and caste-based mobilizations¹. What is caste and how can it be defined? What are its core descriptive dimensions? How could it survive for so long and what keeps it going even in modern, contemporary times? Although these questions appear to be rather simple and obvious, the rich literature dealing with these issues do not offer any straightforward answers. Caste may be defined “as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a

specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system”².

Social Prohibitions

Though the Caste system with its rigorous social exclusivity did not crystallize in early Sangham period, later social stratification started. Caste is an endogamous group or a collection of endogamous groups. It bears a common name and its membership is hereditary. Certain restrictions relating to social intercourse, occupations, etc. are imposed on every member. Unchangeable inequality on the basis of birth and profession; and restrictions on marriage outside one's own group are indispensable principles of the caste system³. Under the caste system an individual's status is wholly predetermined. Men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it. So, a caste is a closed status group. The obligations and barriers are intensified to the utmost degree.

Caste in Kerala

The influence of caste on the Hindu mind has been astonishingly firm from the time they came to be organized as a society. In the early Indian society, there was four-tier hierarchical caste stratification. There were the Brahmins or priests, the Kshatriyas or warriors, the Vaisyas or merchants, and the Sudras or workers. In addition to these four castes, there were the outcastes who were untouchables. It was the belief of every orthodox Hindu that society has been ordained on the basis of the four castes. The authority on which this view rests is the statement in the Purushasukta in the Rig Veda that the Brahmin emerged from the head, the Kshatriya from the arms, the Vaisya from the waist and the Sudra from the feet of God. This belief had been modified, manipulated and interpreted to make class divisions and unjust practices⁴.

Some of the groups, which followed occupations involving manual labour or ate beef, came to be looked upon as inferior in the social scale. From such complexes the concept of untouchability and pollution, which are intrinsic to the caste system, arose. For example the ancient Panans were the friends and counselors of kings during the long ages when pure Tamil culture flourished. But with the Aryan influence in society the Panans consuming meat and hard spirits invited their social degradation and became the lowest among untouchable castes. By the eighth century A D Brahmins attained a position of primacy in social and religious matters. The Chola-Chera war of the eleventh century A.D accelerated this trend. The Kshatriyas who were the ruling class and the Nairs, the warrior class who constituted powerful elements of the population, have come under the effective grip of the Brahmins⁵. The Ezhavas and several other castes that engaged themselves in occupations that involved manual labor were relegated to lower positions in society and subjected to gross social disabilities.

In the ladder of caste at the high end were the Brahmins and at the lowest Pualyas, Parayas etc. and in the middle the Nairs and Ezhavas each having their own levels and subdivisions. The spirit of Dravidian culture was castelessness. Hence it is to be assumed that the caste system in Kerala also is the creation of Namputhiri Brahmins. According to Jati Nirnaya there were seventy-two castes in Kerala⁶. It is interesting to look into the major caste groups of Kerala and their internal and external relations in detail to understand the related social system and behavior that existed in Kerala during nineteenth century.

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Polluting Castes

According to the caste hierarchy that prevailed, the Kammalans or Vishwakarmas came below the low-caste Nairs. They are polluting castes with graded distance. The Kammalans consist of five sub-divisions, namely Kallasari, Kollan, Marasari, Musari and Tattan. Some recognize Chembottis also who made idols with copper for various temples. They are, therefore, supposed to be above the Kammalans in social status. The blacksmiths made household articles like key, lock, etc. and agricultural implements of various kinds. The Musaris made almost all sorts of household utensils in bronze⁷.

Social hierarchy of the traditional craftsmen

To understand the life of the traditional craftsmen, it is necessary to look into the varna system that prevailed in India. The four major tiers of caste system had divided the population of the land. On the top most level was the Brahmins, the priestly class, they were followed by the Kshatriyas, the warriors. The third position was assigned to the Vaisyas, the traders and the fourth were the Sudras, the serving class. This division categorized the population based on their traditional profession. This later set boundaries between them following the rules of the caste system. The craftsmen community of India belongs to the Vishwakarma caste, who according to the popular belief is descendant from the five offsprings of Lord Vishwakarma⁸. The position of the traditional craftsmen in India has seen many ups and downs, their position in society was always fluctuating and usually they did not fall under any of the divisions set by the varna system.

The status of this caste has seen ups and downs over the ages, for their social bearings were affected by numerous external factors. Moving directly to the period of the great temple building activity of southern India, a particular group or community would go up or down in social status depending on the economic importance of the craft work that they were handling. For instance, the earliest reference is to the rathakaras or to the kashtakaras, because quite a few of the early buildings or temples were made of wood. When the technology changed from wood to stone, the carpenters or the takshaka got socially pushed down and the shilpins moved up the social ladder⁹. This shows a direct relation between the statuses of a person or the community which he is a member of and the kind of work he handles. However, interestingly it is also seen that the members of the caste sometimes switched to other crafts within their hierarchy, thus fitting into the changing scenario.

The higher social status enjoyed by the Vishwakarmas is testified by Dr. Krishna Rao. "The most highly organized & efficient of the industrial classes was Virpanchal comprising of Goldsmith, coiner blacksmith, carpenter and mason. In finest period of Indian art particularly between eighth and ninth century, they claimed and enjoyed a social status in the community, equal to Brahmans. The art of engraving & sculpture had attained a high stage of development. It was exclusively cultivated by Panchals who wore sacred thread & considered themselves as Vishwakarma Brahmans. The craftsman being deeply versed in national epic literature always figured in the history of India as missionaries of civilization, culture & religion. The intellectual influence being creative & not merely assimilative was at least as great as that of the priest and the author¹⁰."

From ancient times, Vishwakarmas were closely dependent on the higher castes such as the Kshatriyas. Kshatriyas, being the ruling class were the generous patrons who made large temples, grand palaces and cities. The names of the rulers can still be seen in the ancient rock carvings and copper plate documents, but what about the craftsmen who toiled their whole life for making such masterpieces?

Viswakarmas became as an integral part of the Society

With the formation of village communities in pre-colonial Malabar, there emerged certain occupational groups of artisans. These groups were popularly known as Kammalan or Viswakarma. The agricultural implements made of wood and iron, household utensils, leather goods, ornaments etc. were produced by varied group of artisans who formed the sub-castes of Viswakarma. One of the Vijayanagara Inscription firstly reported that there were eighteen castes indicating the social division of the artisan communities in South India. Later we also have similar references like Pathinettunattar and Pathinenvihayathar from the Nedumburam Thali inscription and Kollam, stone inscription respectively¹¹. The exact number and names of artisan castes given are different from time to time and region to region.

The formation of village communities in North Kerala facilitates the emergence of certain occupational groups in pre-modern Malabar. These artisans formed an essential part of the village community. They performed specialized and skilled jobs as their obligation for each village. The artisan enjoyed a higher socio-economic status than other occupational groups. Carpenters, stonemasons, gold smiths and metal workers, did services to temples and ruling families and their importance is evident from the presence of artisan streets near various temples. These artisans also made implements and vessels for the cultivators and landholders attached to temples. Since the constructions and development of temples, there occurred the growth of artisan communities in North Kerala. Gradually, the demand for carpenters and stone workers increased. Because they were in need for the construction of temples and for the manufacture of images. These artisans concentrated mainly near the temples¹².

The spread of agriculture greatly helped the development of artisan communities in Kerala. There is evidence for the practice of agriculture in various regions of Malabar during the Megalithic period. Megalithic sites were discovered at Porkalam and Kattakambal in Thrissur District. The artisan communities mainly settled down in areas suitable for their work apart from places around temples, Kovilakams and Taravadus. The development of Nair Taravadu in Malabar also helped the formation of artisan communities in Kerala.

Hinduism and Viswakarmas -Unknown Reality

India has a unique tradition of craft, art and design, each linked to the broad domain of kala. The Sanskrit word kala (art) means the divine attributes, which from everyday life, reflects a world view. No distinction is made between fine and decorative, free or servile arts. The eighteen or more professional arts (silpa) and sixty-four vocational arts(kala) embrace all kinds of skilled activity. There is no difference between a painter and sculptor. Both are known as silpi or karigar. The term silpa designates ceremonial act in the Asvalayana Srautasutra, and in this sense it is close to karu, which in the Vedic context stands for a Viswakarma, a god of creation, is mentioned as dhatukarmara, while karmara alone refers to artisans and artificers (Rig-VedaX.72.;Atharva-Veda III 5-6; Manu IV 215). Viswakarma is supposed to create things out of dhatu, “raw material”, an act known as sanghamana (Rig-Veda X72.2)¹³.

Hinduism treated the entire knowledge of engineering in all these fields as a spiritually undignified activity. Neither the gods nor the Brahman saints recognized these engineering processes as spiritually respectable. In several parts of the country, several of these communities tried to define themselves as ‘Viswa Brahmanas’ or ‘Viswakarmas’. In the Telugu country, around the eighteenth century, Portuluri Veera Brahman organized them into a spiritual sect and wrote a book called Kala Gyana (Knowledge of Time and Space), and ordained them into dwijahood on lines similar to the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Even then the Brahmanas did not give them any dignified spiritual status, equal to that of their own beings.

Even if we exclude the toddy –tappers and the pot makers who did not obtain dwijahood (but both in Kerala and Tamil Nadu the Ezhavas and Nadars tried to move in to Hinduhood). The Viswakarmas who took dwijahood on their own also did not acquire respectable spiritual space, because the Sudra ‘feet born’ status assigned to them does not allow such a change. Not only they, but all the communities that advanced our engineering skills were also devised equal status. Hinduism is a religion and the Brahmanas as priests believed that engineering activity was /is un-Hindu. A careful study of tress and their nature in order to use this knowledge for human needs, as the toddy-tappers did, or as the carpenters did, was seen as Shudra un Hindu-activity. The process of understanding the physical characteristics of

iron, gold and silver and the process of engineering that moulded them to become instruments of human use was seen as un-Hindus.

Viswakarmas Status as Like Brahmins- A Reality

In a study of south Indian craftsmen, the Vishwakarma Panchalas claim that they descended from Vishwakarma, the divine architect. The Vishwakarma Puranam in the Tamil language is a compilation of myths. The author of the work is unknown. Some of these myths are from pre-Vijayanagara times. The text is believed to have been written in the eighteenth century and has some references to the East India Company. The text informs that the universe was formed by Brahma and Vishwakarma. It goes on to mention that Vishwakarma was born wearing the sacred thread which the Brahmins used. This shows that the Panchalas claimed Brahmin status¹⁴. There are also inscriptions which allude to this divine origin. An inscription dated AD 1177 from Macherla of the district of Guntur of Andhra Pradesh mentions the connection between Brahma and the Vishwakarma community. It informs that the smiths were the descendants of Vishwakarma.

Although the working class known as Vishwakarmajas today did not get the positions it deserved in Kerala, many references to it have been made in Sangham works like Akam(202,224) and Puram(10,36,87,170,180,206). Instruments like plough, theru, axe and blacksmith instruments and work space (aala) also be mentioned in this works. In Tamil Nadu, Vishwakarmas known as 'Im vaka' Kammalar. They were wearing poonol (sacred thread). These arriving in the southern part of Kerala from Tamil Nadu to build temples, they believe themselves to be Brahmins. It is claimed by the Pancalas (The Five Artisans) that the temple at Kanchipuram contains a copper plate in which the privileges of this sections are mentioned. With the emergence of caste system in full spirit, it became practically difficult for a labouring class like Kammalans to stick on its earlier claims¹⁵. The Brahmanas who hold the temple lands segregated Viswakarmas, outside the agraharas. Apart from the traditional crafts, the involvement of Viswakarmas was there in other fields of life.

In some places, the Viswakarmas, mostly carpenters and goldsmiths, were in the habit of wearing Poonool (sacred thread) just like the Brahmins. Sanskritic elements played an important part in their ritual and social life. Such people also claimed that they are Brahmins. Their origin was the justification for this claim. Like the title 'Acharya' used by the Brahmins, the Viswakarmas also used the title 'Achary' with their names. In some areas, the Viswakarmas, particularly the goldsmiths and carpenters, have played an important role in the religious and socio-economic life of the village.

For example, like a family priest a Goldsmith or Carpenter is called to aid on number of occasions during an individual's life time. Almost all socio-cultural groups, except, the slave castes, in early days, followed the custom of the ear-piercing of children usually during the first year of the child's life. It was the goldsmith who performed this ritual service. Without touching a boy or girl the duty of Goldsmiths can't done. From this it is clearly known that Brahmins or other upward groups of past allowed to touch them and treated well. In return for the service he was paid remuneration either in cash or in kind. For the girls there was an additional rite of nose-piercing which was done at the age of five. During wedding, the services of the goldsmith were very crucial. He was to make all the ornaments necessary for the consecration ceremony. He had an obvious economic role too. As a manufacturer of ornaments he had to develop economic and quasi economic relationship with his customers. But later some Nair's tried to do this job because of the fear of loss of their status.

Conclusion

Hinduism as a religion and the Brahmins as a priests believed that engineering activity was/is un-Hindu. The relationship between all engineering skills and the spiritual domain was seen as inimical. Brahminism also neglected the spiritual relationship would push them down the ladder of the society. Neither the Rigveda nor the Bagvad Gita speak a word about these tasks in human life. The fact that the children of these social forces are also not allowed to

become priests in the Hindu temples even now is a clear indication that they do not have any respect for these skills and the contribution of these communities to the Indian economy. In three thousand years of history and several Brahman writings during such a long period, no recognition was accorded to these skills and knowledge systems. Even after two hundred years of the emergence of Indian English writing, mainly by Brahmin scholars, the engineering skills of these communities were never recorded-nor were such skills allowed to become part of our school and college text books. In vedic period they have high social status but because of the power of Brahmanisation this community lost their actual position and later degraded as untouchables.

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