Sanskritization

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Sanskritization, a theory of social change, was advanced by the Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas in 1952 to describe how upward mobility occurs in India's caste society, previously thought to be static (Srinivas 1952). It is the process by which lower caste groups attempt to raise their status and position within the overarching caste hierarchy by emulating upper caste social norms. The classical delineation of caste comes from the Sanskritic Vedic period (1200–500 BCE) and is embodied in the concept of *varna*, which literally means "color." There are four varnas in descending order of supposed ritual purity: (1) Brahmins (priests and scholars), (2) Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), and (3) Vaishyas (merchants and traders), who represent the "twice-born" upper castes and whose male members have donned the sacred thread after going through a ritual "second" birth; followed by (4) Shudras (laborers and servants) and Dalits (formerly "untouchables" or "harijans"), the latter of whom are technically considered to be outside the *varna* schema.

However, to speak of caste in an everyday manner is to speak of the hundreds of subcastes or *jatis* (traditionally endogamous birth groups based on occupation), which make for a more complex idea of both caste and hierarchy. *Jatis* are understood to fall under one of the five levels in the *varna* schema, though there are examples of *jatis* (even in the ancient texts) that clearly do not fall into any particular segment of the *varna* theory, which makes *varna* more of a prescriptive than a descriptive idea. What is clear, however, is that *jatis* vary by region, and, most significantly, a *jati* group may change its *varna* designation over time through the process of Sanskritization. Srinivas defined it as follows: "Sanskritization is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste" (Srinivas 1966: 6). He further explained: "Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. The claim is usually made over a period of time, in fact, a generation or two, before the 'arrival' is conceded" (Srinivas 1966: 6).

On the one hand, Srinivas's view of caste mobility was much more dynamic than previous accounts; on the other, the Brahmin-centric society he described may have been a product not only of ancient India but also of British colonial-era census taking, which solidified *jati* groups through enumeration and allowed for and encouraged jockeying between them (Dirks 2001). Examples of Sanskritization would include the adoption of vegetarianism, exclusivity in the exchange of food with proximate castes, teetotalism, the prohibition of widow remarriage, and the engaging of the service of Brahmins for ritual purposes. It often involves the replacement of customary practices, such as the worship of village deities, ancestors, trees, rivers, and mountains, with classical ideas and beliefs propounded in Sanskrit texts such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The ancient Hindu texts were written in the Sanskrit language, which has long been the language of Brahmin learning and

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ideology, though the lines between the Sanskrit language and "tradition" are not always clear (Staal 1963). For instance, Hindi, Tamil, and other vernacular versions of epics such as the *Ramayana* may in fact diverge from the original or even critique the so-called tradition but would still nevertheless be considered part of "Sanskrit culture."

Srinivas's theory of Sanskritization was based on his own ethnographic studies of the districts of Coorg and Mysore as well as other places across India, allowing him to make the claim that Sanskritization was a universal mode of upward mobility. What the idea of Sanskritization recognizes is the great regional variation of subcastes, across linguistic, ethnic, and geographical boundaries and the local power struggles that may shift a *jati* group's position in the hierarchy, even if it does not lead to any structural change in the *varna* schema. In later writings, Srinivas stated that there could be other models of Sanskritization based on the other *varnas*—so, for instance, there is also a Kshatriya model, which may be the dominant political power in any area. Further, even though *jati* groups might gain power through other means, such as by becoming landowners, Srinivas argues that it is acts that are seen to make their lives more ritually pure that elevate them in the social hierarchy. Therefore, even as processes of secularism and westernization—which Srinivas defined as the new technology, institutions, knowledge, beliefs, and values introduced by the British, even if they did not originate in Europe—have changed society, it is still levels of ritual purity that offer the most universal notions of prestige. Srinivas explains: "A millionaire Gujarati Bania will not enter the kitchen where his Brahmin cook works, for such entry would defile the Brahmin and the cooking utensils" (Srinivas 1966: 13–14).

Caste as an organizing principle of social stratification is intertwined with the Hindu religion and its notions of purity and pollution. Hence, caste is both a social and a religious identity, a point debated by Mohandas K. Gandhi and the first leader of the modern Dalit movement, Bhim Rao Ambedkar in regard to whether caste hierarchies could ever be broken in a Hindu-dominant society. In more recent times, Hindu nationalists have tried to bring Dalits (roughly 20 percent of the population) under the Hindu umbrella since they are a valuable "vote-bank"—a term also coined by Srinivas (1955) to describe how electoral influence works in democratic politics. While Srinivas's model of social change allows for the great diversity of *jatis* within each *varna*, as well as the diversity of local practices that go into uplifting castes and making others more downtrodden, his theory of Sanskritization also reinforces the idea of the cultural hegemony of Brahmins across India, even as he allows for the diversity of Brahmin beliefs and practices depending on the region, and indeed areas where Brahmins are not the dominant caste. Ultimately, however, his theory of emulation relegates the lowest castes to the perpetual role of imitator, based on a presumed sense of their own inferiority.

The contemporary political theorist and social activist Kancha Ilaiah offers a different understanding of the cultures of the lower castes and what he frames as their refusal of Sanskritic social norms and practices. In *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, published in 1996, Ilaiah argues that Dalitbahujans (a coalition of Dalit and other low castes, literally meaning "oppressed and exploited majority") have never been part of a Hindu (and therefore Brahmin-centric) cultural system. Most crucially, they do not only *not* aspire to raise their social position by emulating upper castes but also believe their own social practices and norms to be more in tune with the values of equality and humanism, and

hence morally superior to and indeed more emulatable than, Brahminical culture in particular. Ilaiah grounds his ideas in material conditions, as when he writes: "My parents had only one identity and that was their caste: they were Kurumaas. Their festivals were local, their Gods and Goddesses were local, and sometimes these were even specific to one village. No centralized religious symbols existed for them" (Ilaiah 1996: 1). Ilaiah argues that the history of everyday life of the Kurumaas was beyond the Hindu fold to the point where they had a unique cultural and moral consciousness.

If one considers the Dalit movement in India today, it is clear that Sanskritization is not the sole motor of social change. Rather, Dalit and other lower caste groups are working toward social mobility and uplift in legal and other systems that would allow for better and more equitable access to education, including the study of English, health care, clean water, and jobs, to name a few areas. In addition, the controversial reservations system enabling some members of lower castes to gain entry into colleges and government jobs attempts to address historical and contemporary injustices. That said, lower castes must contend with entrenched upper caste privilege in most, if not all, modern institutions.

SEE ALSO: Caste System of Stratification; India

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