

Topic 8

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Hindu Ideology, Society, and Culture

- Purity: ritually superior status; a category in logical opposition to impurity
- Caste: An endogamous, ranked, occupationally defined group, known as jati in India and based on differences in ritual purity and impurity

Caste System

- Caste membership is assigned by birth
- Each caste is ideally an endogamous group
- According to French anthropologist Louis Dumont, Indian caste is an ideological system of categories based on:
 1. Hierarchically ordered social groups
 2. Detailed rules of separation
 3. A division of labor
- Four varna (the most general castes): Brahman kshatriya Vaisya Sudra

Caste: Four varna

- Brahman - priest, teachers - religious elites
- Kshatriya - protectors of people - political roles, warriors
- Vaisya - cattle herders, farmers, traders
- Sudra - serve the top three varna

Outcastes: the Untouchable

- Harijans / exterior castes
 - Outside the caste system (outcastes)
 - Dirty jobs and extremely poor
 - Called the "untouchable", meaning they mustn't have social contact with other castes

Central Feature of Hinduism

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- Belief in Samsara - endless cycle of death and rebirth experienced by human could
- Belief in Karma - actions in the existence determine conditions of one's future existence

Function of Samsara and Karma

- Explains one's position in the caste system
- Accepts social inequalities as a natural process
- Holds out the possibility of being reborn in a higher caste
- Emphasizes the importance of following proper ritual behavior as the only means of find salvation from samsara

Ritual purity and impurity

- Prescribed by Veda (sacred text):
 - Pure and impure behavior
- Impurity (ritual pollution): low ritual status attributed to association or contact with polluting biological events or products
 - Impurity is capable of polluting
 - Impurity requires ritual purification
 - Impurity is associated with specialization
 - Impurity is associated with birth, death, menses, puberty
 - Impurity is associated permanently with social groups

Hindu Ritual: Marriage

- Caste endogamy
- Subcastes exogamous
 - Hypergamy: marriage to someone of higher rank
 - Hypogamy: marriage to someone of lower rank
- Normally marriages are arranged "First comes marriage, then comes love."
- Chastity is a ritual requirement, especially for the highest castes like the brahman subcastes
 - Infant marriage
 - Prohibition on divorce and widow remarriage

Hindu Culture: food and eating

- Caste groups are distinguished by
 - Strict vegetarianism
 - Avoidance of domestic pigs and fowls
 - Abstinence from alcohol or from eating pork or beef
- Giving food. - establish dominance; receiving food - establish subordination
- The high caste person requires the services of the lower caste person to restore his own high ritual status
- Food restriction and rituals within a household
 - Specific place to cook, eat, wash
 - Ritual of cooking: high rank; purification
 - Order of eating

The Sacred Cow

- Cattle sacrifice, the central to Hindu ritual system
- Treated as deities, an important feature of the ritual purity complex
 - Fresh/sour milk, butter, urine, dung: purifying agents; consumption of the fresh and leather working: polluting
- The sacred status: increased by the arrival of the beef eating Muslims and the British

Debate: whether Indians keep to many cows for primarily religious reasons

Numerous assessments by Indian public officials and development experts:	Anthropologist Marvin Harris
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Indians wastefully maintained vast numbers of useless cows because of irrational religious beliefs<ul style="list-style-type: none">A. The poor qualityB. The quantity of fodder consumed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practical economic choices > Strictly religious consideration• Support of the gain based subsistence system: draft animals & dung for fuel and fertilizer• The left interpretation was based on irrelevant market economy cash accounting

Indian Cattle Complex VS East African Cattle Complex

- In common:
 - Both play a central role in the material infrastructure, the social structures and the ideological superstructure
- In contrast
 - A. Primarily produce male traction animals (animal protein production is secondary) vs primarily produce animal protein
 - B. Beef consumption

