

Unit 5

Brahminical Perspective

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the position of Brahmins in society
- explain the Brahminical interpretation of the caste system
- discuss the pattern of interaction between Brahmins and people of other castes.

5.1 Introduction

In the previous unit you learnt about the colonial Perspective on Caste. This unit seeks to explain the viewpoint of Brahmins on the caste system. The Brahmins being experts in conducting and interpreting rituals laid out in the sacred texts emphasised the scriptural and ritual aspects of caste. They quoted chapters and verses from the scriptures and in doing so justified the caste system and their own position in it to a large extent. Interestingly, Brahmins were conversant with Sanskrit language, which is regarded as ‘Deva bhasha’, or the language of the gods. It is also the language in which incantations in rituals are made. Agreeably, Brahmins who are fluent in the language of the gods treat themselves as superior to the rest of the people. This consolidates their position in society a great deal.

Since the lifestyle and the world-view of the Brahmins including their ideas about the caste system are derived from the scriptures, the Brahminical perspective on caste is, in essence, based on the scriptural dictates and their articulation in the lives of Brahmins¹. We begin the unit with the traditional theory of the origin of Brahmins and their essential attributes in the larger framework of varna and the jati. Subsequently, we discuss the principle of purity-pollution, which forms the basis of interaction between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, and then go on to exploring the inter-dependence of Brahmins and members of other castes in society, which is guided by their occupational specialisation.

5.2 Varna-Jati Theory

The term ‘varna’ means colour. In the religious texts, the concept of varna is used for grading people. *Rigveda* bears reference to the Arya varna comprising the Aryan people (who were of light complexion) which has been contrasted with the Dasa varna comprising the non-Aryan people (who were of dark complexion). What the *Rigveda* does mention, however, are four

orders in society, Brahma enfolding the priests, Kshatra enfolding the warriors, and Visha enfolding the common people. Ghurye (1950:46) writes, ‘These classes or orders are regularly referred to in later literature as varnas, so much so that popularly Hindu religion has come to be defined as ‘Varnashrama Dharma’. Yet in the *Rigveda* the word ‘varna’ is never applied to any of these classes. It is only the Arya varna, or the Aryan People, that is contrasted with the Dasa varna. The *Shatapatha Brahmana*, on the other hand, describes the four classes as the four varnas. ‘Varna’ means colour, and it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in contrasting the Arya and the Dasa, referring to their fair and dark colours respectively. The colour-connotation of the word was so strong that later on when the classes came to be regularly described as varnas, four different colours were assigned to the four classes, by which their members were supposed to be distinguished.’ In later literature, these orders are referred to as varnas.

One of the later hymns better known as the ‘Purushasukta’, established that there are four orders in society and that each order has emerged from particular body part of the Purusha — the primeval man as described in the previous unit also. These varnas are, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. It is said that they have emerged from mouth, arms, thighs, and feet of the Purusha. Following the varna scheme, there are only four orders into which people are divided. In addition to the varnas, the vedic literature mentions groups such as Ayogava, Chandala, Nishada, and Paulkasa who lay outside the varna scheme. They were required to perform ‘unclean’ tasks such as scavenging, were despised and treated as untouchables.

In the *Mahabharata*², each varna is associated with a particular colour, Brahmin with white, Kshatriya with red, Vaishya with yellow, and Shudra with black. It was believed that each varna could maintain its purity and its colour by avoiding marriages between people belonging to different varnas. Interestingly, the people of the varna, which was able to retain its purity and colour, gained precedence on the social scale. Largely Brahmins refrained from marrying outside their varna so they were able to maintain their colour and purity. While it may be accepted that normatively the Brahmins did avoid marrying outside their varna, there is no denying that such marriages and/or associations did take place, though infrequently. The considerations of purity of blood and colour were set-aside on some occasions. The case of Satyakam Jabala (son of a maid servant who could not tell the name of the man from whom she conceived him), Visvamitra (of unknown parentage) loom large in the sacred texts. Furthermore, Ghurye’s analysis of anthropometric data (1961) suggests that Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh bear close physical affinity with Churas of the Shudra varna and the Khatrijs of the Vaishya varna in Punjab.

The division into varnas applies, in addition to people, to planets, even soil. This means that planets, soil are distinguished into four varnas. In the words of Bose (1932:11) “Soils can be recognised by means of certain indications. The Brahman [Brahmin] soil is white in colour. It smells like clarified butter and is astringent to the taste. The Kshatriya soil is blood red in colour, smells like blood and is bitter to taste. The Vichy soil is yellow in colour, smells like alkaline earth and is sour to the taste. The Shudra soil is black in colour,....and has the taste like that of wine.” Equally important to note is the classification of people in Indian astrology according to which every person, apart from the varna into which he/she is born, has a varna which is determined by the *rashi* or the sign of the zodiac at the time of birth. It is possible that a

person born into a Brahmin varna has a Vaishya or Shudra varna according to the sign of the zodiac at the time of birth. The varna ascribed by virtue of birth under a particular sign of the zodiac is important in identifying his/her *gunas* (elements or features of quality). In common parlance and in mundane social contexts, the varna of a person refers to the one he/she acquires because of birth and not the sign of the zodiac (See Saraswati, 1977).

Basically there are three *gunas*, *sattva guna* (associated with brightness, intelligence), *rajo guna* (associated with energy, rigorous activity), and *tamo guna* (associated with darkness and inactivity). It is believed that these *gunas* combine different proportions, which brings about variation in behaviour of people. It is stated in the *Gita* that the four varnas were created on the basis of the *gunas* in the sense that *sattva guna* enjoining serenity of mind, self control, forbearance, wisdom, and aptitude for acquiring spiritual knowledge are the attributes of the Brahmins; *rajo guna* enjoining bravery, fury, steadiness, and inclination for acquiring kingship are the attributes of the Kshatriyas; skill to till the land, maintain herds of cattle and other animals for sustenance, trade and commerce are the attributes of the Vaishyas; and *tamo guna* enjoining aptitude for serving others, performing manual work are the attributes of the Shudras (Kane, 1962). These also define the duties ascribed to the people of the four varnas in the scriptures. More clearly stated, the Brahmins are ordained to master the sacred texts. According to the *Vishnusmriti* (2-1.17), 'A Brahmin teaches the Veda...A Brahmin sacrifices for others, and receives alms...' The Kshatriyas are ordained to fight in wars and battles and to protect the people of other varnas from enemies. They could also perform administrative and military services. The Vaishyas are ordained to make a living by engaging in trade and merchandise, cultivation of land and breeding of cattle. The Shudras are ordained to serve the people of other castes with modesty and humility. . It is commonly held that *dharma* or righteous action is one, which is in line with the caste rules. Apart from these norms, Manu prescribed activities that people of different varnas could take up in times of crisis. He laid out the following, work for wages, service, rearing cattle, seeking alms, receiving interest on money, among others, as activities that could be undertaken by people of all varnas for subsistence in difficult times. The laws of Manu enshrined in the *Manusmriti* mention that failure of the observance of caste rules leads to dire consequences. Those who digress from the sacred code were relegated a lower position in the social order. The injunctions were more impinging on Brahmins who set standards for others to follow and who sat in judgment over others' performance in society. Notwithstanding the prescriptions in the sacred texts, the laws for adopting an occupation were not always adhered to strictly even by the Brahmins. Instances of departure from the code laid down by Manu are found in the early Buddhist literature. Following the *Brahmnopattimartanda*, there are at least six kinds of degraded Brahmins on the basis of undertaking occupations other than those laid out by Manu, rendering service to the king as personal servants, engaging in trade and selling, making sacrifices for others because of greed for money, acting as priests of the entire village, serving as cooks, and refraining from their daily sacrifice. These Brahmins are like Shudras (see Saraswati, 1977).

A Brahmin has the ritual power to ensure the safety of the king through his prayers, offerings and rituals that appease the deities. It is believed that the deities do not accept the offerings from a king till a Brahmin priest mediates the rituals that accompany them. An enraged Brahmin can curse kings and their subjects. There is widespread fear that a Brahmin's curse will come true.

Box 5.1: Position of the Brahmin and the King

‘At times the king is above the Brahman, as for example in the royal consecration ceremony. At other times the Brahman appears to be superior to the king, as for example in the Manavadharmasastra, and in passages from the Mahabharata. This conundrum is often addressed in terms of the postulation of two levels of truth, a higher level at which the Brahman is clearly pre-eminent, the source of everything else, and a lower level at which kings must protect and sponsor Brahmans in order for them to exist, as gods, on earth’ (cited from Dirks, 1990 :59).

The position of the Brahmin stood out in sharp contrast to that of an untouchable. Now, while the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas like the Brahmins could read the Vedas or hear readings from them, these were required to be taught and explained to them by a spiritual preceptor. The untouchables, on the other hand, were not allowed to hear the Vedas. The Vedas mention that molten lead should be poured into the ears of the untouchables who listen to readings or chanting from them. While the Brahmin was revered, the untouchable was looked down upon and treated with disgust. The untouchables remained marginalized in society to the extent that access to temples, water sources, and other places of social interface with the twice born were denied to them. They were forced to maintain physical and social distance from the rest of the people. They would not be allowed to enter the premises of the twice born. The Brahmins in Tamil Nadu lived in distinct areas called the *agraharams*. They confined most of their activities within the *agraharam*. Surely the non Brahmins, particularly untouchables were not allowed to enter it except for scavenging for which they were instructed to use the back lanes and in a way that they were not seen, neither did their shadow fall on a Brahmin. Untouchables could not wear footwear or keep moustache. If they did grow moustache, they could not twirl them up. The women were not allowed to wear the upper garment. In addition, untouchables were not heard on important matters that concerned everybody in the village including them. They had no say in decisions taken neither about their own affairs nor on issues that were of pertinence to them directly.

Dumont (1988:67) explains, ‘The set of four varnas divides into two: the last category of Shudras, is opposed to the block of the first three, whose members are ‘twice- born’ in the sense that they participate in initiation, second birth, and in the religious life in general. These twice-born, in turn divide into two: the Vaishyas are opposed to the block formed by the Kshatriyas and the Brahmanas, which in turn divides into two.’ Here, the second birth (first birth being that from the mother’s womb) implied in the expression ‘twice-born’ refers to the initiation ceremony in which men wear the sacred thread for the first time over the left shoulder and across the body. This symbolises the second, and spiritual birth of a person and qualifies him to perform certain rituals, recite certain *mantras* (sacred incantations). The Tamil Brahmin boys, for instance, are encouraged to recite the gayatri mantra (verse invoking the sun god) only after they have undergone the sacred thread ceremony.

In the Pali texts the word, ‘jati’ is used for caste. It may be noted that the word does not appear in vedic literature. In the *Katyayana Srautasutra* it is used for family. It occurs in the *Nirukta* (X11.13) and in Panini (V.4.9) who explains *brahmanjati* as meaning one who is a Brahmin by caste (see

Kane, 1962:1633). Saraswati writes (1977:18), ‘Though some authorities (for instance, Yajnavalkya) have clearly pointed out the difference between *jati* and *varna*, many others have used these words synonymously. Manu (X.31) used the word *varna* for mixed castes, and, often conversely, *jati* for *varna* (V11.177, IX.85-6)’. Manu propounded that children inherit character -types from their parents and that a person adopts the occupation for which he is temperamentally equipped by heredity. Jatis are, in essence, groups sharing an occupation (see Bose 1962). Manu has laid down detailed rules of hypergamous (*anuloma*) marriages and hypogamous (*pratiloma*) marriages. The laws of Manu prescribe that children born out of parents belonging to the same *varna* are *savarna* meaning ‘same *varna*’ while those born out of parents belonging to different *varnas* are *golaka*. When people belonging to a *varna* marry those belonging to a higher one repeatedly over five or seven generations only then their *varna* gets upgraded which means that they are treated as belonging to the higher one. Further, Manu states that jatis originate because of mixed marriages i.e. between people belonging to different *varnas*. Saraswati (1977:21) states, ‘The following law operates consistently in the case of jatis : the children begotten from wedded wives equal in *jati* belong to the *jati* of their fathers, but if the mothers are *bijati* (not of the same *jati*) then children born of such union are called *apasad* (base born) and placed under a *jati* which is neither of their fathers nor of their mothers. This is how the various *jatis* have sprung up.’ It may be mentioned, however, that children born out of *niyoga* (union for the sake of begetting children) inherit the *varna* of their mothers and not the biological fathers. Several Brahmin jatis are believed to have been the descendants of sons born out of the mind or the intellectual prowess of the gods. These are the *manasputras*—*manas* means mind and *putra* means son. There are others that have descended from sons born from the body fluids of the gods. There are yet others that have descended from sons born from wedlock and by natural birth. Such births are, however, mediated by divine intervention (see the *Brahmnopattimartanda* for details).

Brahmins are believed to have descended from a sage or seer after whom their *gotra* (an exogamous division the members of which are believed to have agnatically descended from a common ancestor) is named. It is commonly believed that the Brahmins of an earlier generation, like the sages who were their ancestors, were often endowed with *brahmatejas*, a quality which gave to their appearance of a particular glow and serenity (see Beteille, 1996:48).

5.3 The Ideology of Purity-Impurity

The ideology of purity - pollution regulates relationship between different castes significantly. It also provides a basis of hierarchy of castes. Thus, more pure a caste is, the higher is its place in the social hierarchy. The Sanskrit word for purity is *sodhana*. It is derived from the root, *sudh* meaning ‘pure’. The cognate of *sudh* is *saucha* meaning cleanliness. The Hindu scriptures lay down several means for attaining purity. Spiritual purity comes from studying the Vedas and other sacred texts; meditating on a deity; undertaking pilgrimages; repeating the name of god; practicing continence (*brahmacharya*), asceticism (*tapas*), non-violence (*ahimsa*); and avoiding food (such as onion, garlic, non-vegetarian food) that raise anger, lust, and passions. (see Walker, 1983).

of some critical caste rules as of a Brahmin who touches an untouchable by accident, or because of birth or death in the family, or any other reason), purification through performance of specific rituals is necessitated. Dumont (1970) situates the contrast between Brahmins and untouchables in the opposition between purity and impurity. For him, the opposition of pure and impure lies at the very root of hierarchy to an extent that it merges with the opposition of superior and inferior. He suggests that specialisation in impure tasks in practice or in theory leads to the attribution of permanent impurity to certain categories of people such as the untouchables. The untouchables regularly perform unclean tasks (such as scavenging, washing dirty linen, disposing dead animals and human bodies, making shoes). One example is that of the washermen who, in most parts of the country, clean the soiled linen at the time of birth and menstruation. The other example is that of cobblers who have to use leather (which is an impure material) for making or repairing footwear. Since these are the traditional tasks of the untouchables, they remain perpetually impure. This is permanent impurity. The impurity is contagious in the sense that it gets transmitted to those who touch or are touched by them. The defilement is corrected after performing a prescribed set of rituals. On the other hand, Manu has identified bodily secretions such as excrements, semen, saliva as impure and their presence on the body makes a person impure. In addition, some events as those of birth and death, menstruation, are considered to 'harbour a danger which lends to the temporary seclusion of the affected persons, to prohibitions against contact etc. A person's closest kin often becomes impure, therefore, untouchable for a specific period of time. Touching a menstruating woman or one who is observing taboos after child-birth or a man who has returned from the cremation ground after lighting a funeral pyre all impart temporary impurity. This is temporary impurity. Water is a purificatory agent; bath in running water, better still in sacred water as of the Ganges is particularly efficacious in cleansing impurity.

In order that the Brahmin retain their purity, the untouchables and people of lower castes are believed to absorb the temporary impurity of the Brahmins by cleaning their premises, and their soiled clothes, and performing the tasks that are treated as unclean and impure by them and in the process, become impure themselves. In doing so they ensure that the Brahmins remain in a state to perform rituals and act as intermediaries between gods and people (see Basham, 1954, Hocart, 1950, Gould, 1958). In the broad sense, one of the factors identifying the purity of a caste is whether or not a Brahmin accepts drinking water from the hands of its members. Surely, there are local variations. Hutton (1983) cites the example of Brahmins in north India who take water poured into their own drinking vessels by men of Shudra who are regarded as relatively clean e.g. Barhai (carpenter), Nai (barber), Barbhuja (grain-parcher), Kahar (fisherman, well sinker, and grower of water-nut). Brahmins in south India are extremely particular in this regard. Like water, exchange of food and dining between castes is fraught with several regulations. The glance or the shadow of an untouchable on the cooking pot of a Brahmin is enough to throw away its contents. Interestingly, food cooked in water as by boiling known as *Kachha khana* is subject to more restrictions than *pakka khana* or food cooked in *ghee* or clarified butter. Just as the restrictions on water and food, those on smoking are observed too. At this juncture it may be mentioned that the material of which the cooking utensil is made is of much importance. Hutton (1983) records that the higher caste people does not use earthenware because it cannot be completely clean. Furthermore, pollution can be contracted through bodily contact too.

Orenstein (1965) explains that basically there are two types of pollution an individual may be subjected to, intransitive pollution, and transitive pollution. The intransitive pollution is one which is incurred when a birth or death occurs in the kin group of an individual. On such occasions, defilement is said to spread throughout the kin group. Importantly, kinship assumes importance here. Near relatives stay impure for a longer time than distant ones. What is interesting to note is the belief that the extent of intransitive pollution is proportionate to the level at which the varna is located. This means that higher the rank, lesser is the pollution. Thus a Brahmin gets less intensely polluted than the Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shudra. Similarly, a Kshatriya gets more polluted than a Brahmin but less polluted than the Vaishya or Shudra. Transitive pollution, on the other hand, is incurred by way of coming in contact with polluted material. It is of two kinds: external pollution and internal pollution. External pollution is that which is acquired by touch or contact with polluted material. It can be removed by cleansing of the polluted person or polluted object. A spoon touched by an untouchable for example, becomes polluted. This pollution can be removed by washing it thoroughly. Similarly, a person who becomes polluted when an untouchable touches him/her has to take a bath in order to remove the pollution and re-gain his/her purity. Internal pollution is that which is acquired when a person consumes polluted foodstuff, polluted water, or any other substance, which gets absorbed in the body.

The criterion of touch or contact as a means of contracting pollution is not as simple as it seems to be. The pertinent question here is, why a washerman is treated as impure and polluted when he goes to the house of a high caste man on the occasion of a marriage but not treated so when he comes to collect dirty cloth or to deliver clean ones. One of the plausible explanations is that he does not pollute the house when he comes to collect dirty clothes or deliver clean clothes because at that time he is an 'agent of purification' (Dumont, 1970). On other occasions as that of marriage he is not an agent of purification but a man belonging to an untouchable caste. So he is treated as impure.

If an untouchable pollutes an earthen pot of a person belonging to a higher caste, it has to be replaced. If the same person pollutes a bronze pot, it may be washed scrupulously and need not be replaced. Stevenson (1954) suggests that since the earthen pot is porous it is difficult to purify it by washing. Moreover, it comes cheap so may be replaced easily. The bronze pot, on the other hand, can be washed rigorously; is more expensive so cannot be replaced easily. The people of impure caste are said to pollute the premises of temples by their sheer presence. It is for this reason that they were forbidden to enter the temples and the residential areas of the upper caste people.

Radhakamal Mukerjee proposes the following degrees of social avoidance in ascending order: '(1) against sitting on a common floor; (2) against interdining; (3) against admission in the kitchen; (4) against touching metal pots; (5) against touching earthen pots; (6) against mixing in social festivals; (7) against admittance in the interior of the house; (8) against any kind of physical contact' (cited from Murphy, 1953: 63-64). Hindu conception about purity pollution governing how people interact with and behave towards each other may be consolidated in the following ideas that have been widely drawn from Kolenda(1997).

i) **Dietary and Marital Customs**

According to Kolenda, one of the basic means of determining the place of a caste group in the ritual rank in its diet and marital customs. It has been found that vegetarianism characterises purer caste. A Brahmin is pure because he/she is a strict vegetarian. This does not, in any way, mean that there are pure castes comprising of those that are vegetarian and impure castes comprising of those that are non-vegetarian. It may be noted that Kolenda's ascription of vegetarianism to Brahmins does not apply universally, for there are fish and meat eating Brahmins in Bengal, Kashmir and in other parts of the country.

Stevenson (1954) identifies the dietary and marital customs as indicative of the ritual status of castes. There are degrees of impurity based on the kind of non-vegetarian food consumed by the people of different castes. It is especially defiling to eat pork and/or beef. He mentions that it is worst to eat beef followed by pork, mutton, chicken and eggs (in this sequence). So castes that eat pork are lower than those who eat mutton, and castes that eat mutton are lower than those who eat chicken. Vegetarian castes are more pure. The next in hierarchy are the castes that eat mutton, chicken and eggs followed by untouchables who eat all these in addition to pork sometimes beef.

So far as marital customs are concerned, high castes are associated with the practice of monogamy. This is particularly stringent for women. Divorce and remarriage, particularly widow re-marriage is not allowed. Men may, however, marry more than once, middle and lower castes are permissive of widow re-marriage. This is, however, not preferred because it lowers the rank of a caste.

ii) **Inheritance of pollution**

Lower castes are said to suffer from permanent impurity. All the members of a caste inherit the defilement. Stevenson (1954) explains that any waste product from the body is treated as impure; death makes the entire body waste and those who deal with these incur impurity. The barber who deals with hair and nail chippings both waste products of the body is impure. What makes him impure to further extent is his duty to wash the male corpse of his clients while his wife washes the female corpse before cremation. Similarly, the washerman washes dirty clothes, those soiled by bodily excretions; the sweeper removes faeces and filth; he eats from pots and other utensils that have been polluted because of birth or death in the family, he wears the clothes in which a man dies. In effect the barber, washerman, sweeper and other castes are treated as polluted because of the kind of material they handle. Pollution spreads through touch, which means that one who is polluted passes on the pollution to other persons when he/she touches them. This is most explicit when water and/or food are exchanged. A Brahmin, as mentioned earlier does not accept food or water from anyone belonging to a lower caste. He may accept food, which is coated with *ghee* or clarified butter from castes belonging to middle ranks; he may take raw ingredients from anyone because it is believed that fire would purify these in the process of cooking.

iii) **Dividual- Particle Theory**

Marriot and Inden based their understanding on Hindu writings – Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, classical books of moral and medical sciences, and late medieval moral code books of certain castes in Bengal. It is

believed that these writings reflect the Hindu native models and bespeak of the people's own view of a person as 'individual' which also implies indivisibility into separable portions.

Marriott and Inden (1977) explain the theory of pollution in terms of coded-substance, which is itself, made up of coded particles. These particles (consisting of saliva, sweat, bits and pieces of hair) get exchanged among people through food water etc., in the course of interpersonal interactions. Each *varna* is believed to have received a specific coded substance from the creator and it is only proper that the people maintain or else improve the code and not indulge in anything that would make it inferior. Each person gives off and also receives these coded particles in social interaction. Now, better-coded particles are received from gods and people of higher castes while worse coded particles are received from those belonging to castes lower than one's own. It is suggested that one may get better particles through right eating, right marriage, and other right exchanges and actions. These may get consolidated because the inferior particles are got rid off through excretion etc. Further, they propose that the particles of different kinds separate, combine, and re-combine in different permutations because of the heat in the body which is generated in the process of digestion, sexual intercourse etc. It is for this reason that hot bodily and nutritive substances need to be carefully managed when one is associated with serving or eating warm food. Marriot and Inden maintain that the coded substance may break up into particles that may combine and recombine with each other. This determines the degree of a person's pollution or purity, which suggests that the Hindu view of a person is one, that is dividual (meaning divisible into separable portions).

iv) Guna Theory

The Guna theory of pollution was proposed by Marvin Davis (1976) who was a student of Marriott and Inden. This theory was derived after interviewing the Hindus of West Bengal but it is also mentioned in the sacred books such as *Bhagavada Gita*, *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*, *Purushasukta* and the *Manva Dharamasastra*. According to this theory, the feminine principle called *prakriti* joins with the male matter called *purusha*. The union of *prakriti* and *purusha* forms three basic materials called *gunas*. The three *gunas* are *sattvaguna*, *rajoguna* and *tomoguna*. The *sattvaguna* is a white substance, generates goodness and joy and inspires all noble virtues and action; *rajoguna* is red, 'produces egoism, selfishness, violence, jealousy, and ambition; *tamoguna* is black, engenders stupidity, laziness, fear, and all sorts of base behavior.' (Davis, 1976:9). The *sattvaguna* may be treated as symbolic of purity while the *tamoguna* may be treated as symbolic of impurity. It is believed that all the *gunas* are present and well balanced in the body of the Brahma while one or the other *guna* predominates among the four *varnas*. The proportion of *guna* in each *varna* is maintained through the lifestyle, diet, marriage pattern or the inter caste relation. Vegetarian food builds up *sattvaguna*, non-vegetarian food builds up *rajoguna*, and beef, left over food, spoiled food, and alcohol build up *tamoguna*. It is believed that disproportionate admixture of the *tamoguna* with the *sattvaguna* or the *rajoguna* creates, what Stevenson referred to as 'permanent pollution.' Brahmins involved in reciting sacred chants, performing sacrifices, and preaching the scriptures largely have *sattvaguna*. Similarly, untouchables involved in the work of scavenging, tanning, and that which involves dealing with dirt and filth, animal hide, body excretions

largely have *tamoguna*, and Kshatriyas or Vaishyas who are involved in warfare, and activities that sustain life such as cultivation, herding, trading respectively, largely have *rajoguna*.

It may be understood that people of different *varnas* and *jatis* may improve their *guna* through diet, work, and performance of religious rituals, meditation and learning. Another way in which the *guna* may be improved is through marriage. In the words of Davis (1976:16), ‘Through activities in accord with *dharma* and through mixing one’s own physical nature with that of *sattvik* substances, for example, the defining features of a birth-group are transformed positively and its rank elevated; for in this way individuals of the group and the birth- group as a whole become more cognizant of Brahma and lead a more uplifting, spiritual life.’

5.4 Jajmani System

The mundane relationships between castes are governed by what is known as the ‘jajmani system which may be viewed from the standpoint of the day-to-day interactions through which economic values are economically expressed and economic behavior is invested with religious meaning’ (Gould,1987:8). The Brahmin performs rituals on different occasions for people of other castes. In return, the Brahmin receives grain or service from those he has obliged. Now, while the rendition of ritual is from the Brahmins to the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, the grain is dispensed in the opposite direction i.e. from the other *varnas* to the Brahmins.

Box 5.2: Alternative view-point on the Jajmani system

‘Fuller’s argument presumes, with Heesterman, Pocock, and Dumont, that the prestations made by the dominant cultivators were primarily matters of the ‘rights’ of the recipients, and not of the ritual functions carried out, through gift- giving, by these donors in their capacity as *jajmans*. More recently, Good(1982) has accepted Pocock’s reasons for denying the existence of a ‘jajmani system’, and goes on to argue that *jajman* and *jajmani* are Hindi terms whose equivalents in the other Indian languages, or at least in Tamil, are not much used and to speak therefore of a ‘jajmani system’ outside of the Hindi-speaking region is to impose an alien interpretation on the data’ (cited from Raheja, 1990:93).

In the jajmani system, the patron is addressed as ‘jajman’ while the render of the service is addressed as ‘kamin’. It is essential that both the Brahmin priest himself as also the place where he performs the service are pure or are purified before the ritual. This can happen when pollution that would otherwise defile a ritual is removed. The only way this is possible is by engaging specialists who perform such tasks as barbering, washing cloths, sweeping and mopping the floor. The pollution is removed or absorbed by those who perform such tasks.

For the kamin, as mentioned earlier, there are ‘payments in cash and kind made daily, monthly, biyearly, per piece work, and on special occasions, depending on the type of service rendered and in part on the good will of the jajman’ (Wiser, 1936: XXIV). A kamin may serve several twice born patrons within his village and/or those in neighbouring villages. Often his network with the patrons is used for negotiating marital relationships between them. In several villages, the marriage negotiations are conducted through the *nai* or the barber. He is required to find out the economic standing and resources

of the bride's family. Later, when the bride joins her husband after marriage, the barber's wife helps her in adjusting in the husband's house and dealing with his family members amicably.

Gould (1987) mentions that there are several reasons for expansion of jajmani relations beyond the confines of a village. The first reason is that an average village may not contain representatives of all the castes (specialising in different occupations) that participate in the jajmani system. It is, therefore, inevitable to draw the services of specialist(s) from adjoining village(s) when other caste members have not adopted the occupation. The second reason is the initiative of the specialists to expand their clientele with the purpose of raising their income. There is no restriction on the number or the location of clients a specialist may engage in. A specialist may engage with as many patrons as he is able to serve. The third reason is the dissatisfaction of the jajman. If a jajman is not satisfied with the service of the kamin, he may seek another one often from an adjoining hamlet or village. This is because the people of the caste to which the erring kamin belongs may not agree to serve the dissatisfied jajman because of casteist loyalty.

Three attributes of the jajmani system need elaboration. The first attribute of the jajmani system is functional interchangeability. Kolenda (1963) explains that functional interchangeability refers to a situation in which the occupation of a caste is adopted by another one when the specialist caste is absent. This may be explained with the following example. People belonging to the Chamar caste do sweeping. If there is nobody belonging to the Chamar caste in the village, then sweeping is done by people belonging to another caste. This may happen with other castes too. The second attribute of the jajmani system is its temporal continuity. A jajmani relationship lasts over generations. It is inherited from father to sons by both jajmans and kamins. When a joint family divides into nuclear ones, the clients are divided in the same manner as property. This implies that a kamin continues to serve the sons of an old man (who had been his jajman for several decades) even after they have separated and set up different households. Similarly, the sons of a kamin continue to serve the patrons of their father when he is no longer in a position to render service or after he dies. The third attribute of the jajmani system is the interchangeability between the roles of jajman and kamin. Some persons are both jajmans and kamins depending on the context. A person serves one or many jajman(s). An ironsmith, for example, may serve the Brahmin households as a kamin and himself may be a jajman to the washerman and the barber.

The jajmani system defines the basis for the exchange of services between different castes who specialise in different occupations³. In doing so it also lays out the pattern of interaction between the different castes. Now, the fundamental assumption here is that members of a particular caste specialise in a specific occupation inherited from their ancestors and which is sanctified in the sacred texts. Gupta (1984) explains that this does not always happen in reality. The sacred texts, however, make mention of only a limited number of *jatis*. The number of *jatis* that exists today far exceeds that mentioned in the sacred texts. What has happened is that there has been much diversification in the occupation of different castes. This means that people of a particular caste who were earlier engaged in only one occupation now specialise in more of them. Brahmins, for example, have taken to cultivation, warfare and even business. In the present day, the *jajmani* system is not operative in its full.

5.5 Emergent Concerns

What is important to note is the fact that the rigidity with which the upper caste people maintained casteist restrictions is on the decline due to several factors. Out of these, at least three seem to be particularly significant. One factor is the increase in mobility of people more so in public transport as trains, buses etc. in which people of several castes are compelled to travel together. Since defilement is so common in such situations that its removal is neither always possible nor convenient. The second factor is the spread of education which dispels superstitions and beliefs in unfounded explanations such as the one that the untouchables are impure by birth and therefore, need to be kept away from. The third factor is the initiatives taken by the government in overcoming untouchability. It is widely popularised that anybody found guilty of practicing untouchability is liable to be punished. Moreover, the government offers reservation in educational and vocational institutions as also jobs in the public sector. In addition, several NGOs are engaged in the endeavour of abolishing untouchability and all kinds of discrimination on the basis of caste. The chief concern is with strengthening the economic and social base of the lower caste people who have remained marginalised and Peripherised in society.

Interestingly, overthrowing the place assigned to them and the sanctions imposed on them in the sacred texts, the people—particularly those belonging to the lower castes aspire to acquire a place in the upper rungs of the caste hierarchy. In order to achieve this, they begin with adopting the customs and lifestyle of the upper castes. M.N. Srinivas coined the term ‘sanskritisation’ to explain this phenomenon. In the words of Srinivas (1952:32), ‘A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism and by sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short it takes over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of Brahmin and the adoption of Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though, theoretically forbidden. This process has been called ‘sanskritisation’...’A jati sanskritising itself may begin to assert itself as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, or Vaishya over a span of one or two generations. While the lower caste people adopt the lifestyle and code of conduct of the upper caste people, the upper caste people themselves are tremendously influenced by Western thought and Western way of life. This is explained as the process of westernisation.

Joan Mencher (1974) brought out the viewpoint of the lower caste people on the caste system and said that, (i) the caste system does not merely provide every caste with special privileges, rather it leads to and strengthens economic exploitation of the lower castes;(ii) it kept the people in the lower wings of the caste hierarchy so isolated that they could not unite with each other for bringing about change in the system, and improving social and economic condition. On the other hand, the high caste people with greater wealth and political power could readily unite and establish inter-regional communication networks which the lower caste people could not even think of. You will learn more about the view of caste ‘from below’ i.e. from the point of view of the lower castes in the next unit.

The supremacy of Brahmins in religious, social and political spheres was collectively and systematically challenged by non-Brahmins in the form of a movement. This entailed mass mobilisation of non-Brahmins against Brahmin dominance. The earliest **non-Brahmin movement** was launched in the mid-

nineteenth century in Maharashtra. After that similar movements were initiated in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu ‘where laws relating to government service and places in government-run universities have been written to pointedly discriminate against Brahmins’ (Kolenda, 1997: 119).

Berreman (1991) has criticised the Brahminical view of caste which is drawn heavily from classical Sanskrit texts and focuses on ritual hierarchy leading to strict regimentation of society on the following grounds:

- i) The Brahminical view takes a position that the people conform to universal values unquestioningly while the truth is that individuals have their own will. They doubt and sometimes defy universal values.
- ii) The Brahminical view lays excessive emphasis on ritual hierarchy as the basis of caste organisation undermining the importance of economic and political factors, and power. In real life situations it is neither appropriate nor possible to delineate singular basis (such as ritual hierarchy as done by Dumont) for caste ranking.
- iii) The Brahminical view dismisses any scope of cross-cultural comparison of caste system in India. While it needs to be accepted that caste in India is indeed unique, it is not correct to safeguard it from comparison with similar forms of gradation in other cultures.
- iv) The Brahminical view is based on sacred Sanskrit texts. These texts are, in fact, biased and of limited scope. The perspective that emerges from them, therefore, presents caste as rigid, stiff, stereotyped, and idealized construct.

People at the grass-roots, however, maintain that this perspective is far from reality. Dumont does not take note of the numerous social and political movements in Indian history that sought to overthrow the burden of caste⁴. He does, however, refer to Bhakti movements but notes that they are not able to make any significant impact on caste hierarchy. Most people, especially those belonging to lower castes concede that the Brahminical perspective holds good for the high castes only and does not have a bearing with their own lives. They maintain that it has provided legitimisation of the high handedness and dominance of the Brahmins. More significantly, the subaltern view, among others, the distinct dalit perspective (which is greatly influenced by Ambedkar, Lohia and others) provides an alternative interpretation of the sacred texts and their position on the caste system. Notwithstanding the criticism, the Brahminical perspective has been a significant component of studies on caste system in academic circles. It has been hotly discussed and debated upon by sociologists, social anthropologists and other social scientists alike.

5.6 Conclusion

We have noted that Brahmins, in effect, draw legitimisation of their position from Hindu religious texts. These texts bestow a degree of sacredness to all that they say and do. Brahmins, in effect, draw legitimisation of their position from Hindu religious texts. These texts bestow a degree of sacredness to all that they say and do. Brahmins, in effect, draw legitimisation of their position from Hindu religious texts. These texts bestow a degree of sacredness to all that they say and do. It is equally true that the Brahmin is not a monolithic, uniform category. The Brahmins are themselves grouped into hierarchical groups based on the nature of their engagement. Those who, accept *pratigraha* or offerings at centers of pilgrimages (better known as *pandas* in

north India and *pandarams* in south India) as the Maithil and Bengali Brahmins of Deoghar, Chaubes of Mathura, Dikshattars of Tamil Nadu and others; accept food and *pratigraha* in mortuary rites and/or at the time of sickness as the Sawalaxhi Brahmins of Varanasi, Bhattas of Punjab and others; keep genealogies as the Hakaparas of Bihar and others; and practice agriculture or perform act as cooks or the Tyagi of western Uttar Pradesh are treated as degraded Brahmins (see Saraswati,1977).

Quintessentially the Brahminical perspective on caste as mentioned earlier, is largely drawn from the sacred texts in that it focuses on the principles and ideas that provide the basis on which, ideally, the rituals and conduct of the Brahmins has to be organised. It is in the unceasing flux between the textual constructs and their practice that the dynamism is contained. These principles and ideas that are interpreted and articulated in myriad of ways that make for local variations and yet make for the identity of the Brahmin as a social group.

Notes (comments of the editor)

1. There is an implicit assumption that the Brahminical view is the view expressed by the Brahmins in the scriptural texts. Since this is the most popular view, we accept it in this unit even as we find it necessary to interrogate the issue.
2. There is a need to question the widespread view that *Mahabharata* is a Brahminical text.
3. It ignores the relations of production in agriculture.
4. It is not appropriate to equate Dumont with Brahminical view.

5.7 Further Reading

Dumont,L.,1988 *Homo Hierachicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Oxford University Press: Delhi

Ghurye,G.S.,1950, *Caste and Race in India*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay

Kolenda,P.,1997, *Caste in Contemporary India: Betond Organic Solidarity*, Rawat Publications. Jaipur

Saraswati,B.N.,1977, *Brahmanic Ritual Traditions*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study: Simla