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## REFERENCE MODELS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: A CASE FOR RURAL INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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*Indian society has undergone tremendous changes during the past few decades. The influences of the forces of change have been felt in different degrees at various periods but independence brought many far reaching changes. The recognition of equality, development of communications and new occupations, spread of education, growth of towns and technological centers, and above all the political mobilization of masses have immensely changed the spectrum of life in India.*

*The caste system has been viewed as the life blood of society in India and therefore social mobility was also considered relevant within the framework of caste. Consequently, all efforts towards mobility were visualized on the varna scale. Such research brought forth the twice-born (Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya) models serving as reference groups, and to complement other changes Western and modern models were formulated. These models, however, suggest that a variety of changes are occurring, leading to cultural metabolism, yet do not help us to understand the emergence of new trends of change. The purpose of this paper is to examine the limitations of the three reference models related to caste system; briefly analyze the relation between "origin status" and "destination status" of the individuals in and outside the caste system; and to propose a democratic model to encompass all changes. It is suggested that "democratic model" could be a methodological tool for the analysis of social mobility in India.*

THE perspective of this analysis stems from a concern to understand individual as well as corporate action relative to trends of social mobility in rural India. There are a variety of reference models and concomitant processes at work. Indeed, in a modernizing society reference models are several and this is true for Indian society also. For instance, such models may be indigenous or foreign, nativistic or alien, traditional or modern. In addition to this, most striking is the intricacy of the orientation system and corresponding complexity arising from the statements and behavior of the people. In terms of their upward mobility, it is indeed intriguing that individuals as well as corporate groups seem to make arduous efforts to approxi-

mate their ideals and actions in reference to adjacent, parallel, and remote models. However, such attempts may not be rewarding within the caste system, since every caste does try to maintain exclusive identity by incorporating certain new traits to retain its position in the hierarchy (see, Gould 1961:949; Marriott 1968:103).

It is widely recognized that "caste" refers to ranking along the religious and ritual behavior dimension, since in its essence it is a religious group (Srinivas 1952:viii). However, the ritual rank of a caste, though relatively fixed along a purity-pollution scale, is not only the determinant of the social position of its members. This point has been amply emphasized in several recent studies (Chauhan 1967; Galanter 1968a, 1968b; Gould 1961; Harper 1968; Marriott 1959, 1960, 1968; Mayer 1960; Pocock 1955; Rowe 1963, 1968; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967, 1968; Silverberg 1959; Singer 1968; Srinivas 1952, 1962, 1968). In other words, caste is not simply a

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper read at the 1970 meeting of the Central States Anthropological Association. Research is a part of a larger project conducted in 1963-1966. I am indebted to the University Grants Commission, New Delhi for financial assistance and to Hugh Sherry Plunkett, University of Virginia for his critical reading of the earlier draft of this paper.

religious group; its modern manifestations can be observed in all aspects of social life in India.

The aim of this paper is to suggest that it is possible to gain at least theoretically, an insightful understanding of social mobility in India by analyzing the main socio-cultural processes and their association with a variety of reference models.

#### REFERENCE COGNITION AND SOURCES OF MOBILITY

To summarize the theoretical implications of reference group theory, Sherif remarks, "reference groups can be characterized simply as those groups to which the individual relates himself as a part (and) to which he aspires to relate himself psychologically" (1969:285). This interpretation, though it casts light on the process of self evaluation and attitude formation, does not stress the process in which a person who identifies himself with a reference individual will seek to approximate the behavior and values of that individual in his several roles.

Merton (1968:336) advanced the concept of reference group, "that men frequently orient themselves to groups other than their own in shaping their behavior and evaluations, and it is the problems centered about this fact of orientation to non-membership groups that constitute the distinctive concern of reference group theory." They not only associate themselves with a reference category but also endeavor to enact specific roles. It is not unusual that such enactments are not merely directed toward merging of the emulating group into its esteemed reference category but even to outrank such reference categories for a far better rank. In such emulation process the emphasis is on those standards and attributes which make indices of high status rather than all features of reference groups. Merton points out the relevance of the role model and emphasizes, "the concept of the role model can be thought of as

more restricted in scope, denoting a more limited identification with an individual in only one or a selected few of his roles" (1968:357).

The mobility tactics are guided by goals with varying individual and group interests. Cultural models not only induce mobility but also suggest priorities, ways, demands and necessary social maneuver to obtain projected goals. A person engages in different mobility drives through individual and group action, for his several social groups and goals, pushing one more than the other at a particular juncture. Individual mobility, sometimes through personal achievements, is possible.

However, tactics of greatest significance are those undertaken by a low caste, particularly by using the traditional standards of ritual purity to embark steadily on the path of upward mobility. In sum, to rise through achievement usually takes time measured in generations and also the ability to command ample wealth and power. Mere emulation of high caste practices, in itself, neither brings about much gain in rank nor personal or family aggrandizement. Ample emphasis has been laid down by several studies that Sanskritization and Westernization are of crucial importance to the understanding of social change in India. In the context of the trends of change it is emphasized that as democratic values penetrate deeper into the cultural values and social actions of the people, these values would be associated with elevating practices of both scriptural and modern origin.

As an empirical referent, the village Awan will be briefly introduced, and the identity and convergence of various models and processes of change explored in the context of social mobility.

#### THE VILLAGE

Awan is a village situated in Kota district of Southeastern Rajasthan at a distance of 24 miles from the industrial and commercial city of Kota. Primarily

it is an agricultural village of about 2,574 persons and composed of 41 Hindu and 6 Muslim castes. The history of the village is roughly traceable as far back as the seventh century; however, it was only in Mughal times that it became a part of formerly Kota state, and remained a Khalsa village (an area over which the government, rather than a zamindar, had the tax-collecting rights) till the independence of the Indian nation.

During the princely rule, a hereditary headman used to function as a mediator-cum-broker between the state and the people for the collection of revenue. Now the village has an office of *patwari*, the *gram panchayat* and *nyaya panchayat*, and a higher secondary school, a primary health center and a sub-post-office, having links with the district administration.

#### SANSKRITIC MODELS

It has been reported that Sanskritization has been occurring throughout the length and breadth of India among most of the nontwice-born castes and tribes (Srinivas 1968). Thus Sanskritization has played a significant role for anticipatory socialization where higher or twice-born varnas are used as reference models, viz. ; (1) the Brahminic model, (2) the Kshatriya model, and (3) the Vaisya model.

Theoretically, a caste has to choose only one model for its reference and has to be relatively estranged from others because of their divergent ritual positions, purity-pollution norms, distinctive occupations, dietary habits, psyche and objective goals, etc. Such a mobility is anticipated and contemplated within the fold of caste system. Though much light has been cast on the Sanskritic model and its *varna* constituents have not been given much attention, characteristically there is much inconsistency and opposition of values held by the aforesaid components of the Sanskritic model.

The ideals of the Brahmin and Kshatriya, for instance, are mutually

opposed and incompatible. The commonly understood Brahmin ideal stresses intellectual refinement, teetotalism, professing of sacred occupations, asceticism and non-violence, while the Kshatriya ideal stresses strength, prowess, pugnacity and use of meat and liquor, etc. Again, the Vaishya ideal is opposed to the Kshatriya, as it emphasizes conservation of wealth through tillage and trade, purity in religion, a vegetarian diet, etc. (cf. Fox 1969:39; Marriott 1968:110; Weber 1958: 56). Finally, the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya ideals together in several ways oppose the obsequious values of the Sudra.

The *varna* references are undertaken for identification and imitation in order to reach a projected goal. Thus certain attributes of competing and divergent varnas could be used by a caste or its segment as a reference for the realization of a particular goal. In cases when a low caste borrows several opposing traits from different varnas the probable rank of such a caste becomes nebulous and dialectically weak. For instance, a low caste in Awan, while attempting to move on the ladder of the *varna* scheme, finds suitable for its goals the ritual purity of the Brahmin, luxurious consumption and dietary habits of the Kshatriya and the riches of the Vaisya. Marriott aptly remarks, "when rural castes choose the same *varna* idea, they may sometimes be ranged in degrees of rank according to their realization of that one ideal, but generally the civilization *varna* scheme offers a variety of aristocratic postures which are parallel or roughly equal in value" (1968:110).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, in most of the caste mobility studies, we have focused our attention on differences among the castes, varnas, their value orientations and ritual behavior, almost denying any systematic treatment of similarities which not only tell us that ritually neutral area of interactions is larger than the ritually conflicting area. The contrast between rural and urban mobility patterns discussed by Marriott have generated several useful points where he suggests the latter provides a system of open opportunities (1968).

In Awan, out of 21 caste selected for this discussion, 17 have referred to their mythical origin from some upper varna, while only 4 have used historical facts to substantiate their origin from higher varna, and finally only 3 have been able to suggest mythical as well as historical facts for such a claim. The leather-working castes and sweepers are in a dilemma and have indicated their uncertainty for such claims within the varna scheme, yet they have installed the idols of higher gods of Hinduism in their temples and continue to eat beef and carrion. Sweepers continue to eat meat of the domesticated swine (cf. Lynch 1968).

Another dimension of such claims is associated with local and regional history and corroborated by the readily available evidence from the memorial stones, probably installed in the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is said that a bloody war was waged near the site of the village between a Kshatriya ruler and one of the fiefs of the Moghul king Shah Jahan. Many women sacrificed their lives on the funeral pyres of their husbands. In commemoration of these valorous men and virtuous women memorial stones were erected. Some of these facts have positively oriented the castes of the middle and lower range to press their claims for a recognition that they were originated from upper varnas, particularly from the Kshatriya varna.

#### WESTERN AND MODERN MODELS

In contrast to as well as complementary to the Sanskritic model there are two other models, viz., Western and modern.<sup>3</sup> Though the term Western is widely subsumed within the concept of modern, it more often refers to culture, modes of

thinking and action. "Modern" as a cultural label is not confined to Western but may be interpreted in a variety of meanings from use of foods and beverages to education and political ideology. Government officials, teachers, urbanite visiting kinsmen, the urban educated young men act as the cultural transmitters who continue to bridge the gap between traditional and modern, the rural and urban, and indigenous and foreign. These are the people who by adapting to new values emphasize their rationalization of certain areas of ritual neutrality for suggestive modernity.

Though various sectors of population according to their ritual rank, literacy levels, resources and maneuverability are subjected to "modern" ways, the process itself causes cultural metabolism. The selection and elimination of traditional as well as modern traits pushes the growth of a new model—which comprises revivalist restorationist characteristics combined with new, western, modern traits—stressing on the democratic ideals. Similarly, while the Sanskritic model refers to a need of "corporate action" by the groups for a systematic identification and imitation connected with distinctive patterns of reference group, the Western and modern models demand individual action and are more diffused and pervasive in character.

#### THE DEMOCRATIC MODELS

Democratic model, as discussed here, refers to persons who represent democratic roles and relations. The ancient history of India showed some examples of relative "democracy." The history of Buddhism in India indicates some of the peculiar ramifications of semi-theocracy and monarchy, yet several democratic ideals were discernible. Weber, while commenting on the transformation of ancient Buddhism remarked, "Buddhism is quite intentionally treated (here) as a specific levelling and, in this sense, a

<sup>3</sup> Among several other classification of these processes, the important classification suggested by Robert Redfield and Milton Singer in the fifties seems to be adequate where Sanskritization is represented as a process of orthogenetic change and Westernization and modernization as heterogenetic change (1954:53-73).

'democratic' religion, especially in connection with the derogatory treatment of ritual, including caste ritual" (1958: 240).

Among the greatest kings Ashok, who became a zealous convert to Buddhism and claimed to have the position of secular patron, emphasized the concept of "welfare state" (Weber, 1958:142, 260, 292) which was originated in the Vedic times. Some degree of tolerance, respect for other religious values, along with certain reforms, viz., protection of the poor, encouragement to the intellectuals and justice for all, were popularized and practiced by some Moghul Emperors in India during the latter part of the sixteenth century. It may be noted that there seems to be a correlation between higher degree of tolerance among various groups, greater participation of the people in national affairs and integration and success of a nation. The purpose here is not to examine this hypothesis, but to suggest that certain traditional values have not been completely rejected but assessed along with other alternatives for expressing these values.

#### MOVEMENT OF CASTES

The movements of castes towards upward mobility is not a new phenomenon in Indian society. Claims by many low castes for a higher position in the caste system were reported as early as 1891, and may be even earlier; however, such positive orientations for reference and imitation have not been favored by the referent castes since their position has been adversely affected by threatening gestures of the low castes. Cohn's remarks further clarify the situation of nineteenth century India. He says, "The census operations were only one of many changes affecting Indian society at the time. The changes which were being simultaneously recognized included the caste sabha movements, expansion of marriage networks, establishment of caste hostels at colleges,

as well as the petitioning of census commissioners for changes in rank accorded a caste in the census tables" (1968:18).

The caste councils as corporate groups and federations functioned effectively during the early twentieth century and dealt with matters connected with caste and its future goals. In the State of Rajasthan wherein the 22 princely states stood as autonomous and sometimes jealous entities, caste infused and sometimes inaugurated horizontal unity throughout the region. In this sense a caste as a single organization at local, regional and sometimes at national level was one of the significant cohesive entities existing throughout the Indian sub-continent.

#### CHALLENGES TO CASTES' RITUAL PURITY

With the introduction of adult franchise and modernizing the law, ritual purity concepts of caste have been threatened. With the abolition of untouchability, its practice is now limited to personal level. Brahmin priests officiate at the marriages and barbers offer services to low leather-working castes, a phenomenon which never existed at least in the known history of the village.

Similarly, the traditional criterion of rendering and receiving of foods has been weakening through the informal interaction of the individuals of different castes. Since the purity-pollution concepts determine the exchange of foods, openly and at formal level no caste would claim to refuse the acceptance of food and water from the hands of a lower caste member. The old upper caste ethics have undergone several transformations since a caste cannot afford to outcaste a large number of innovating members any more and cannot boycott outsiders for violations of customary privileges and disabilities.

The need for mutual support among all the castes at various levels of hierarchy has resulted in such innovations as the

Brahmin and Mahajans attending the feasts of the Mali and Dhakar agriculturists. The temples owned by the upper castes are open for all the castes, yet the untouchables hesitate to use their right. The sphere of ritual autonomy enjoyed by the upper caste has been shattered by the new legislation against untouchability and also from economic and political disadvantages accruing from the perpetuation of such ideal.

#### ECONOMIC FACTORS: REDISTRIBUTION OF LAND

Availability of labor force is another significant dimension which has long been associated with the wielding of power in this village. Only 14% of the population belongs to twice-born castes—and owns roughly 43% of the land. The agricultural basis of economy in Awan not only necessitates the cooperation of the cultivators and artisans, but all those castes who substantially help in the developing agricultural economy. With the growing prices of grains economically well-off upper castes have intensified their agricultural activities and have been in need of ever increasing services of the nontwice-born castes. The strength of the labor force is diffused over a large number of castes, and these castes are aware of their bargaining position in the labor market. Unity among the castes themselves has not only given them power, but has also given them a voice to make demands and press for their claims.

The caste organizations among the numerically preponderant castes, particularly among the agriculturists have begun to function more effectively. The decision of the State Government to restrict the ownership of a person on land-holdings up to 65 *bighas* has further deprived the upper castes of their economic strength. During the year 1964-65, the upper castes sold land to a large number of nontwice-born castes who did not have land or who had small

economically insufficient holdings. The transfer of ownership of land has again strengthened the social position of the nontwice-born castes and has motivated them to press for new claims and accruing benefits.

#### NUMERICAL PREPONDERANCE AND POWER<sup>4</sup>

The 14 per cent population of the upper or twice-born castes, being literate, have an advantage over the rest of the nontwice-born castes. But these twice-born castes are divided among themselves for the contest of power, besides the fact that all of them are divided into subcastes. As such they lack a common integrative organization, while the Dhakar, Kacchi, Mali, Khatik and Balai, Mer and Bola have strong caste organization and caste councils. All the nontwice-born castes have an advantage over the twice-born castes. The twice-born castes are divided into cleavages to seek power, while the nontwice-born castes seek to place their own men in status positions in village councils that help them in their attempt to hold powers; such placing assists them in changing their own positions in the economic, political and opportunity structure.

#### LEADERSHIP: INTERLINKAGE WITH REGIONAL POLITY

In the establishment of the national democracy, and adult franchise, the politicians had to draw heavily upon the rural votes. With the gradual shift in the distribution of benefits by local wealthy entrepreneurs to the politicians in Awan a new kind of élite and leadership has emerged. These have to search means from the traditional as well as the new sources of power across the caste lines for manipulating the masses. These are the people who have structural "observ-

<sup>4</sup> The term "power" used here relates to "capacity of a group to enforce its collective decision upon (a) its members, and (b) its social environment" (Merton 1968:378).

ability" over the actions and decisions of the local groups. At the same time they obtain support from regional élites, politicians and organizations.

During all the past elections upper caste persons have been elected for membership in the State Legislature; all of them belonged to the Congress Party. In both the 1962 and 1967 elections, the candidate was the same. However, in 1962 he belonged to the Congress Party whereas in 1967 he contested on a ticket of the Janata Party; a dissident group which emerged from the Congress Party. This major contestant was a Rajput, an identifiable model of Kshatriya varna, which is also an important identification model for social mobility for the majority of castes in Awan. He was elected. He was also known for his liberal ideas and projections of welfare programs. His background of law, legislative procedures and inclination to provide timely help were also well known. In addition to this, he also had political patronage of one of the contestants for chief ministership of the State, who had resigned from the Congress party and joined the dissident faction. A combination of these factors lead him to success.

The emerging reference models combine in certain ways the old socio-ritual and the new economic and political values. The new view of caste seems well suited to a situation in which castes have overlapping claims by identifying itself with various reference models. The new social forms protected by legal recognition may be expressed in a variety of goals: religious, economic, political and educational. Sanskritic model is predominantly "normative type" which sets and maintains standards for the individual, while the Western and modern are "comparison type" which provide a frame of comparison relative to which the individual evaluates himself and others (cf. Merton 1968:337-338). Further, Sanskritic model demands "corporate action" by the

groups to move upward on a ritual scale, while Western and modern models necessitate for systematic identification and imitation with individual modes of thought and action.

Though all these models refer to vertical social mobility, they embrace conflicting as well as complementary processes of change ranging from traditionally closed and immobile system of limited opportunities to an infinitely expansive system of open opportunities. The Sanskritic model refers to vertical social mobility in the closed interactional system of ritual hierarchy, while the western-modern refers to an open, attributional system of secular achievement-oriented hierarchy. The convergence of several goals based upon the felt locus of individuals and groups in the infinitely expansible system of open opportunities in independent India has helped evolve a "democratic model" of identification and imitation.

#### CONCLUSION

We return to the opening theme: the applicability of various reference models to the study of multi-dimensional social mobility in rural India. The mobilization of the traditional hierarchical structure into a new and dynamic structure with new identity and dignity has lead the people to synthesize the internal and external resources to improve their life chances. Two processes are visible: (1) a collective search for coherent identity within the system, i.e., by choosing a model of identification within the caste system, and (2) inovating the future actively which implies exploring the alternatives which are feasible and available, i.e., by finding a model or models of imjtation.

Sanskritization, westernization and modernization and several other processes including democratization will find added momentum as a larger population would continue to explore new alternatives. The emergent "democratic model" demands a new role and would imbibe



more consciousness as one of the hallmarks of a developing society creating more and more frustrations and yet finding ways for resolving them.

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