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Travelling Through Caste

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With its peculiar caste system, India is considered the most stratified of all known societies in human history. This system is 'peculiar' as it divides human beings into higher and lower castes and this division is backed by certain religious sanctions based on the sociological concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution'. While the higher caste is associated with 'purity', the lower caste is associated with 'pollution'. The people of the lower castes are not allowed to undertake religious journeys and yet are expected to enable the pilgrimages of the higher castes by playing the role of laborers. Radical Bhakti saint-poets like Kabir, Chokamela, Tukaram and Ravidas, among others, pointed out the futility of undertaking pilgrimages. Instead of purifying the body so that the soul can go to heaven, they urged people to listen to their inner self and build an inclusive society based on equality and social justice. My paper focuses on Indian pilgrimages as seen through the lens of caste narratives. I address the relationship between caste and religion, with a specific focus on the roles undertaken by the lower castes when the higher castes undertake pilgrimages. I raise the question of the possibility of studying the idea of pilgrimage without caste references.

Key Words: caste system, religion, pilgrimage, social justice, Hinduism and caste practices, *Dalits*

Introduction

Geoffrey Moorhouse, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, London, in one of his travel books entitled, *Om: An Indian Pilgrimage* (1994:15), describes India's many contradictions in the following manner:

No other country has lived with so complicated a past so equably, assimilating everything that has happened to it, obliterating naught, so that not even the intricate histories of European states have produced such a rich pattern as that bequeathed by the Mauryas, the Ashokas, the Pahlavas, the Guptas, the Chalukyas, the Hoysalas, the Pandyas, the Cholas, the Mughals and the British - to identify only a few of the peoples who have shaped India's inheritance. Nor is there another land that constantly provokes in the stranger such elation and despair, so much affection and anger, by powerful contrasts and irreducible opposites of behavior: wickedness and virtue, caring and indifference, things bewitching and disgusting and terrifying and disarming, often in quick succession. India has nuclear power and other advanced technology close by some of the most obscene slums in creation; she has never failed to hold democratic elections at the appointed time, yet these too frequently elevate men whose own votes can be bought with rupees and other emoluments; she has a high and mighty self-esteem and a taste for moral posturing which

equals anything suffered by her people when the British were here; she has been capable of unparalleled generosity to her last imperial rulers, but she bickers endlessly and meanly with her closest neighbor and twin; she gave birth to the creed of massive non-violent protest and once practiced this effectively, yet in the first generation of independence she has assassinated three of her own leaders, starting with the begetter of satyagraha ...

Such contradictions and anomalies run through India from end to end and this quote aptly captures the milieu of the country. At the heart of India's conundrum is religion and it too, flourishes here as nowhere else. Other countries may have surrendered themselves to a particular religion, but in India the various faiths are deeply entrenched and acknowledged passionately. Virtually everyone practices some form of devotion. An Indian without a spiritual dimension to his or her life is exceedingly rare. As Moorhouse adds:

By this means the wretched can entertain the possibility of improvement, and are sustained in their wretchedness until something better comes their way in another form, or until they are even more blessedly released from the cycle of life and death. The comfortable find in it a justification of their prosperity and an assurance that their submission will continue to bring them rewards. The most truly spiritual

merely hope that with perseverance they will one day achieve enlightenment. Incomparable and inimitable she is; but in this as in much else, India is also our great paradigm (Moorhouse, 1994:15-16).

That 'great paradigm' called India has several other contradictions which Moorhouse does not record, the most important being the caste system. India is considered the most stratified of all known societies. It harbours one of the greatest separating forces to divide human beings into either higher or lower castes. This peculiar division is backed by certain religious sanctions, based on the sociological concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution'. These sanctions help the caste system to renew its legitimacy even after it is challenged. As a result, the caste system, with its myriad variations of superordination and subordination, with confusions and contradictions, rites and rituals, vices and virtues, dogmas and doubts, professions and protests, is able to persist in all regions of India with different degrees of rigidity.

The focus of this paper is Indian pilgrimages as seen through the lens of caste narratives. Drawing upon multiple sources, I study the interrelationship between pilgrimage and caste and I raise the following questions: How do we understand caste while reading the literature of pilgrimage? Since caste devalues labour, what specific roles do the lower castes play when the higher castes undertake pilgrimages? What are the relationships between caste and religion? Is there any way we can study pilgrimage without making reference to caste? These and other questions will be raised while attempting an understanding of the politics of travelling through caste.

Pilgrimage and Hinduism: An Introduction

Before beginning to discuss Indian pilgrimage and caste, let us address the idea of pilgrimage itself. Why do people undertake pilgrimage? Pilgrimage is primarily a religious act and religious communities across the world undertake this practice. In the Hindu tradition, we hear of kings and queens as early as the time of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* going to religious places as pilgrims.

Since the focus of my paper is the inter-relationship between caste and pilgrimage, let me briefly discuss some of the dominant traditions of Hinduism. We must have heard umpteen times that Hinduism is not a religion; it is a way of life. And since it is a way of life, the everyday life of the Hindu is strictly governed by

rules and regulations prescribed in the *Dharma Shastras* which are also called *Smritis*. *Dharma* (ethics / religion) and *karma* (action), *paap* (sin) and *punya* (virtue), hell and heaven are some of its dominant ideologies. Hinduism in practice is full of binaries: believers versus non-believers, tradition versus modernity, *sagun* (ultimate being with attributes) versus *nirgun* (ultimate being without attributes), men versus women, upper caste versus lower caste, and so on. With these dualities it seems difficult to define what constitutes the core value in Hinduism. This is what Kireet Joshi writes in his book, *The Veda and Indian Culture*,

It is impossible to describe Indian spirituality and religion by any exclusive label. Even in its advanced forms it cannot be described as monotheism or monism or pantheism or nihilism or transcend(en)talism, although each one of these is present in some subtle or pronounced way. Even the spiritual truths behind the primitive forms such as those of animism, spiritism, fetishism and totemism have been allowed to play a role in its complex totality, although their external forms have been discouraged and are not valid or applicable to those who lead an inner mental and spiritual life . . . (Joshi, 1991:57).

Hinduism and Caste Practices

Since Hinduism meticulously follows the principle of purity and pollution, it is the upper caste men who always have privilege over the lower castes, Dalits and women in day-to-day religious practice. The Hindus may deny it but that is a fact. And the history of it, of course, goes back to 200 BC when Manu codified all the inhumane and unethical laws against the Shudras and Atishudras in the name of religion. His work was later known as the *Manushastra* or *Manusmriti*. It is with the *Manusmriti* that the full elaboration of the caste hierarchy can be seen. This was the beginning of Brahmanism. During this time Brahmans were given the highest status in society and caste divisions were enforced by the kings. The role of the king was seen to be in protecting *dharma*, now interpreted as *varnashrama dharma* or the law of the castes (and *ashrama* or stages of life). To keep the upper caste interests intact, *varnashrama dharma* was often supported, propagated and reinterpreted through the *Upanishads*, *Sutras*, *Smritis*, and *Puranas*, which are today known in combination as the *Dharma Shastra*.

Thus, through the centuries, the *Dharma Shastra* of the Hindus imposed a series of social, political, economic

and religious restrictions on the lower castes, making the 'untouchables' completely dependent on those 'above' them. As a result, the Panchamas lived a life of physical degradation, insults and personal and social humiliation. They were relegated to menial occupations. They lived outside the village and were fed on the leftovers of the higher castes. Physical contact with the 'untouchables' was said to be 'polluting' and worse still, even their shadows were considered defiling. Even as late as the early part of the 20th century, Dalits had no access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools, markets, etc. The most perverted practice of 'untouchability' was that which, at one time, compelled the 'untouchables' to tie an earthen pot around their neck so that their sputa should not fall to the earth and pollute others. Another such practice was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them. All these forced conditions made the Dalits destitute, deprived, and the most depressed section of the population. As a result, they remained socially degenerate, economically impoverished, and servants of the upper classes.

In ancient times, apart from monopolising state power and property, the upper castes also made sure that learning and the use of Sanskrit language was exclusively their privilege. The 'untouchables', the Shudras and women were barred access to this language. Thus, Sanskrit, which was the repository of knowledge and wisdom, became a closely guarded terrain where no outsiders were permitted. Knowledge and power are closely linked, Foucault has stressed. For him, knowledge of all sorts is thoroughly enmeshed in the complex activity of domination:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things. It induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network, which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault, 1984:119).

This is precisely what happened in the history of Hindu society. The hegemony of the high castes became so pervasive because all knowledge was generated and processed by them. People who enjoyed the fruits of knowledge and power did not let it go out of their hands. Some of the immediate effects of this policy were the non-proliferation of Sanskrit and the creation of an outer group, the Shudras and the 'untouchables',

whose sole purpose of existence was to serve the interests of the upper castes. As a result, for centuries this community remained permanently at the periphery of society, even though they very much participated in the production process. Thus, the people at the lowest stratum were considered 'untouchable', but not the goods they produced.

Challenges to Caste

At different points of times throughout history, the institution of caste has been questioned by philosophers and reformers whose views would create the background for either new religions or new systems of thought. The first challenge to the caste system came from a band of rationalists known as Lokayata which literally means 'restricted to the world of common experience or Charvakas', which was established in the 6th century BCE. Headed by the famous materialist philosopher Charvaka, the movement revolted against the slave system, caste exploitation, and the existence of God. The Lokayata propagated a materialistic philosophy as opposed to the idealism of the *Upanishads* and the *Vedas*. They preached the abolition of slavery, rational behaviour and beliefs, rejecting all forms of sacrifices, rituals and ceremonies. Thus, the Lokayata emerged as a progressive and optimistic philosophy supporting the cause of the oppressed.

During the 6th century BCE, both Jainism and Buddhism set for themselves the task of questioning Brahmanic orthodoxy. The religious scriptures were scrutinised in search of truth. Compared to Buddhism, Jainism did not do much for the oppressed classes for the simple reason that it spread mainly among the traders and businessmen. Nevertheless it made a dent in Brahmanism.

In this sense the Buddha was the first social revolutionary who challenged Vedanta philosophy and rejected the authority of the *Vedas*. His simple way of preaching righteousness of conduct over social tyranny, slavery, inequality, etc. made his philosophy understandable to the common people. The Buddha did not prevent any caste or class from becoming his followers. 'Untouchables' could find a respectable place in society for the first time by embracing Buddhism. The Buddha invited the poorest and the lowliest to live and learn with princes and merchants, billionaires and proud Brahmans in the brotherhood of his Order. The humble craftsman or barber could rise to be a philosopher and teacher in the noble scheme of the Buddha.

It is unfortunate that in spite of its radical philosophy, Buddhism lost its battle with Brahmanism and was appropriated by it. As a result, the teachings of the Buddha influenced Hindu religion and he was given a high place in the Hindu pantheon as an *avatara* (incarnation) of Vishnu. According to Swami Dharma Theertha, this happened because the Brahmins perceived a threat to their entrenched position from the popularity of Buddhism. Theertha writes:

When the whole country was basking in the sunshine of great ideals of brotherhood and a virtuous and beneficent life, when the king and the commoner were cooperating in building a great Indian nation, when the sacred feeling of religious devotion and patriotic benevolence roused by Buddhism were producing glorious blossoms in the fields of science, literature, arts and architecture, when the people of India liberated from their bondage were carrying the joyful tidings of emancipation into distant lands and filling the world with the fragrance of the Buddha's teachings, alas! in the land of that Buddha, the Brahman priests were studiously engaged in polishing the chains of imperialism and replenishing the armory of aggression and exploitation with Manu Shastras, Sukra Nitis, Puranas, idolatrous temples, Kali worship and institutions of wily priestcraft (Theertha, 1992:96).

Once Buddhism started declining, Hinduism laid emphasis on caste distinctions, and it was Brahmanism, the militant part of Hinduism, which took charge of devising different sinister designs. It is believed that Hindu reformers like Kumarilabhata (8th century), Adi Sankaracharya (8th century), Ramanujacharya (12th century) and Madhavacharya (13th century) played a great role in attacking the various tenets of Buddhism and at the same time propagating and consolidating the lost Hinduism.

During the medieval period, the Bhakti movement (roughly from 8th to 18th century), which engendered radical thinkers and mystic reformers, was yet another force that challenged the *varna* system and the stratification of human society on the basis of caste. The movement cut across barriers of caste, creed, language and religion. Many of the well-known poets, singers and saints in the Bhakti cults were from lower castes: Namdev (13th-14th century) belonged to the Shimphi (tailor) caste from Maharashtra; Chokhamela (13th-14th century) was a Mahar ('untouchable') also from Maharashtra; Kabir (AD 1398-1518) was a weaver from Uttar Pradesh; Ravidas (a contemporary of Kabir) was a cobbler also from Uttar Pradesh; Sena

(another contemporary of Ravidas) was a barber from Uttar Pradesh; Tukaram (born in 1608) was a Kunbi (peasant) from Maharashtra. The languages these saint-poets used for their songs, *dohas* and *abhangas* were local languages spoken by the common people and very often they used metaphors connected with their daily work.

In order to prove how caste rules govern the everyday religious life of the Hindus I will now refer to an Odia literary text called *Lakshmi Purana*.

Balaram Dasa's *Lakshmi Purana*

Written in the 16th century by an Odia saint-poet Balaram Dasa, the *Lakshmi Purana* deals with the rules and regulations that govern Puri's Jagannath temple, a famous Hindu pilgrimage in Odisha. The text primarily raises issues relating to the religious rights of Dalit women in Odisha. The story revolves around Sriya Chandaluni, a Dalit woman who fasts and worships Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and the reigning deity of the Jagannath temple on a *dasami* (10th day), in the month of Margashira. Pleased with her devotion Lakshmi pays a visit to her 'untouchable' hut and blesses her. But when Lakshmi returns and wants to enter into the temple, her own abode, she is prevented by Jagannath and Balabhadra, her husband and elder brother-in-law, respectively. They accuse her of being 'polluted' because of her visit to a Dalit household. Having evicted Lakshmi from her home in the course of the story both the brothers suffer untold miseries till they realise that nobody should be treated as 'untouchable'.

Balaram Dasa, by bringing a Dalit woman into the centre of the debate, not only raises the caste question in the narrative but also underlines the significance of reading gender issues alongside caste. This is, perhaps, the reason why some critics like Satya P. Mohanty consider *Lakshmi Purana* as a feminist text. Mohanty, for example, writes:

Balaram Das(a)'s Lakshmi Purana is a feminist text primarily because it shows a female goddess using her personal power to challenge the way society defines identities and rewards virtue, and the way tradition - even when sanctioned by the Lord himself - understands our ascribed jati-identity and its implications for how we are to be treated (Mohanty, 2008:9).

Even though caste liberals believe that Puri's Jagannath temple does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of caste, creed and gender, it must be

mentioned here that the lower castes, especially the Dalits are not allowed to enter the temple even to this day. James M. Freeman's fascinating book on an Odia Dalit's life titled, *Untouchable: an Indian Life History*, describes the situation. Muli, the narrator, happens to be a member of the Bauri community who are exploited by the upper castes due to their low social status. Citing various myths and legends, Muli and his community members are denied entry into temples, including the Jagannath temple in Puri. Instead of protesting against such perverted practices to reclaim their civil rights, Muli and his community continue to remain content with their degraded ritual status. In the following passages Muli brings clarity to this issue:

I remember granny as a smiling, peaceful, gentle person, and very religious; every evening, she set out her clay oil lamp for deities, and offered them rice. She often fasted for the deities and visited many temples to worship deities, even though she was not allowed in. From outside the temple she watched, and gave her greetings. For four or five years during the Shivaratri festival (birthday of Shiva) she went to the Dhabaleswar temple, which stands in the middle of the Mahanadi River, and burned a clay lamp full of oil. She also went to Puri every two years or so to visit Lord Jagannath, but she never went inside the temple. I myself went into the outer compound of the Jagannath temple for the first time only in 1970. I did not go into the inner room; I have never seen anybody of my caste enter the temple compound before this time (Freeman, 1979:124).

Contrary to expectations that Jagannath, the Lord of the universe, is for all, including the poor and the underprivileged, it has been seen that the Odia ruling class has always used the pervasive cult of Jagannath to mould the consciousness of Dalits to a point that has blunted the edge of their protests. The story of Sriya Chandaluni, the legends of Dasia Bauri and many others testify to this. It may be mentioned here that Dasia Bauri was a staunch follower of Jagannath. But being a Dalit, he could not enter into the temple. Finally, Jagannath had to come out from the temple to meet his 'untouchable' disciple, of course at the dead hour of the night lest the *puja pandas*, the Brahmins would see him and question his credentials as the god of the upper castes. Dasia Bauri's case is exactly like that of Shabari of the *Ramayana* who for the devotion of Rama, her beloved God, keeps collecting sweet berries by tasting them one after another. It is quite interesting that Rama, the Hindu God, pleased by her devotion, lovingly ate the already eaten fruits. This is

the way the Hindu myths operate. Myths such as Sriya Chandaluni, Dasia Bauri and Shabari justify that Hinduism as a religion is quite liberal in its principles because it can allow the 'untouchables' and the 'tribals' to have their fare share. But, we all know how Hinduism, especially Brahmanical Hinduism is a bundle of contradictions. What it preaches to the Hindus is never practiced in their daily lives. One can argue that there are many stories where the God himself does not believe in differentiating amongst his devotees based on caste, creed and gender, but people tend to ignore these stories and propagate division based on caste for personal gain. And, hence, there is an ambivalent exploitative measure such as the caste system and its by-product, 'untouchability' practices.

Balarama Dasa wrote *Lakshmi Purana* at a time when several radical Bhakti saint-poets of Odisha challenged the *varna* system and stratification of human society on the basis of caste. In fact, Balarama Das inherited a tradition which was started by Sudramuni Sarala Dasa (15th century) who was the pioneer of the social protest movement, which Odisha witnessed during medieval times. Sarala Dasa was known for three of his major works namely the *Odia Mahabharata*, *Bilanka Ramayana*, and *Chandi Purana*. He wrote these literary works in the language of the common people taking into account the events of the recent past and sundry mundane affairs, and focusing on their real life situations. Thus, his work was a protest against the poets and the writers of the court whose medium was Sanskrit, the language of dominance and power, and against excessive concern with royal characters.

The protest expressed through the writings of Sarala Dasa was given a deeper edge by the writings of the Panchasakha (five-fellow saint-poets) - Balarama Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, Achyutanda Dasa, Jasobanta Dasa and Ananta Dasa - who dominated Odia literature for a century (1450-1550). These five poets together rejected the dominance of Sanskrit in literature and espoused the cause of the vernacular as the medium of expression. Thus, they made major contributions towards the use of the Odia language. In fact, they followed the path that Sarala Dasa had cut in Odia literature as a pioneer and rendered the sacred books of the Hindus into the people's languages in order to make them more widely available. Balaram Dasa's *Jagmohan Ramayana* and *Lakshmi Purana*, Jagannatha Dasa's *Odia Bhagabata*, Achyutananda Dasa's *Harivamsa*, Jasobanta Dasa's *Premabhakti Brahmagita* and Ananta Dasa's *Hetudaya Bhagabata* are the foremost examples in this direction.

The poets also protested against the rigidities of life in temples and monasteries, and sought to rise above the dualistic debates reducing religion almost to the level of an intellectual polemic and ignorant prejudice. In the process, the poets faced opposition, criticism and even conspiracy by the orthodox pundits who instigated kings to create trouble for them. In spite of these various repressive measures by the establishment, the movement could not be fully curbed, even though it had to compromise eventually with the dominant Brahmanical forces.

Chokhamela's Abhangs

Chokhamela, a Mahar saint-poet of Maharashtra also draws our attention. Though there is no evidence to suggest that Chokhamela ever protested against the traditional limits of Mahar village work, the internal evidence of his *abhangs* suggests some protest about the concept of 'untouchability'. In one of the *abhangs* Chokhamela writes that he was born as an outcaste Mahar because of his past *karma*. In another *abhang* he addresses God saying:

*Why have you thrown
this challenge god?
Solve this riddle of mine;
enter my shoes, know
in your own self:
an outcaste,
what rights do I enjoy?
Says Chokha,
this low born
human body every
one drives away.
Doubts prey
on my mind,
what can I do?*

(Mokashi-Punekar, 2002:14)

Even though Chokhamela was a great devotee of Lord Vitthoba, he was not allowed to enter into his temple on pilgrimage. In fact, there is a story about when he was heavily punished because the priests believed that Chokhamela entered the temple at the dead of the night and took away the god's gold necklace. Finally, Vitthoba comes to his rescue. The following is the story told in this context:

*One day Chokha was standing at the door of
the temple from morning till late in the evening,
somewhat hopeless and unusually cast down.
Towards nightfall, the priests locked up the
doors and went away. As Chokha stood there,
still and lone, Vitthoba himself came out,
exclaimed in distress to see Chokha patiently*

*waiting, embraced him, led him to his breast.
The night was spent in the union of the bhakt
with the God, after which Vitthoba playfully
removed his tulsi garland (a garland made of
basil seeds which the varkaris wear as a mark
of their identity) and put it around Chokha's
neck. When the day dawned, he led him out of
the temple, still with the garland. Chokha, in a
state of bliss after this vouchsafing of divine
love, lay down on the sands of the river in a
trance. At the temple the priests discovered that
Vitthoba's gold necklace had disappeared and
remembering that Chokha had been at the
temple doors last, went into a tumult of rage
over the fact that the temple and deity were
polluted and the necklace stolen. Search parties
found Chokha still dazed and
uncomprehending, but with a gold necklace
around the neck. He was punished; tied to the
bullocks and about to be dragged to death but
for the animals who stood their ground, despite
the whip lashing them. The story ends with
Vitthoba revealing himself to the entire
company, holding the bullocks by the horns
(Mokashi-Punekar, 2002:xv-xvi).*

Chokha has written about the humiliating experiences that he had from the upper caste Hindus. Due to his existential conditions Chokha had to compromise with his low caste position and the social protest he wanted to carry forward. But compared to Chokhamela, Kabir never compromised in attacking social inequalities be it due to caste, class, religion or gender. Kabir's strong note of dissent and protest against the existing reality, the glaring disparity between the rich and poor, the discrimination by Brahmans and high caste Hindus towards the low castes, especially the 'untouchables', and his emphasis on a direct relationship with God without the mediation of Brahmans and Mullahs, i.e. the clerics whom he ridicules as greedy and ignorant, had a profound impact. In one of his verses Kabir asks:

*Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
Tell me where untouchability
Came from, since you believe in it . . .
Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels
Decay into dust, while the potter
Keeps slapping clay
On the wheel, and with a touch
Cuts each one off.
We eat by touching, we wash
By touching, from a touch
The world was born.
So who's untouched? asks Kabir.*

(Hess and Singh, 1987:55)

Kabir was opposed to all kinds of religious activities centring around God, including building temples and undertaking pilgrimages. He saw corruption in religious institutions whereby only the priestly classes received advantages. The following poem is an example of his attitude towards Hindu religion and its beliefs and practices:

*Pandit, you've got it wrong,
There's no creator or creation there,
no gross or fine, no wind or fire,
no sun, moon, earth or water,
no radiant form, no time there,
no word, no flesh, no faith,
no cause and effect, nor any thought
of the Veda. No Hari or Brahma,
no Shiva or Shakti, no pilgrimage
and no rituals. No mother, father
or guru there. Is it two or one?
Kabir says, if you understand now,
you're guru, I'm disciple'*
(Hess and Singh, 1987:56)

Like Kabir, Namdev, Tukaram, Ravidas and others raised caste questions within Hinduism and pointed out the futility of undertaking sacred journeys. Instead of purifying the body so that the soul can go to heaven they urged people to look inward, to listen to their inner self and build an inclusive society based on equality and social justice. Ravidas has termed this new society as 'Begumpura'. But Hindu society has hardly taken note of such dissenting voices. Suguna Ramanathan in the foreword to *On the Threshold: Songs of Chokhamela* highlights the dichotomy thus:

Bhakti poets and saints, ignoring caste, swept people off their feet but not for very long; caste distinctions still survive in this country. The most elaborate set of rules and practices governing human behavior towards others like, and different from, self were formulated, and the system kept carefully in place by endogamy to ensure that encroachments into one's plot of power were kept down. It was a highly practical ordering to keep an economic and social arrangement from disintegrating, but what made it so unbreakable, and therefore unfair, was that religion, and ritual practice in the name of religion, were brought in to legitimize that ordering (Mokashi-Punekar, 2002:v).

Thus, Hinduism with the high discourse of transcendentalism has not learned anything from the radical saint-poets. And therefore, Hindus have to constantly move on from one pilgrimage to another to achieve their goals in life. Some undertake journeys for an immediate gain, others for an eternal peace, *moksha*, the liberation of the soul. As Julius Lipner, the author

of *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* writes in another context:

In fact, it seems that a great many Hindus do not actively expect or even seek some post-mortem 'salvation' or liberation. If at all, this is a distant ideal. Religiously, they are more concerned just to stay afloat as they continue life's journey over the hazardous waters of samsara (theory of rebirth). Health, recovery from illness, contentment, economic security, consolation in distress, offspring, success in various ventures, protection from various dangers, possibly a happy rebirth - these are the things that occupy their religious attention. This is not to say that many do not look to moks(h)a in one form or another as a desirable goal. But the fact is that we cannot generalise. Life's ideal for the religious Hindu varies from context to context, from the sublime to the mundane. The Great and Ancient Banyan harbours birds of every feather in its labyrinthine worlds (Lipner, 1994:324).

Moksha is definitely an important aspect in Hindu lives. And, therefore, the Hindus make as many temples as possible in order to undertake pilgrimages. It is, therefore, important that to understand the dynamics of Indian pilgrimage one has to equally understand the political economy of temple culture as well.

For upper caste Hindus, temples are the centres of power. Therefore, they meticulously follow caste laws so that the purity of the temple remains intact. Dalits and women are two constituencies who, according to caste laws, are considered dangerous. If temple entries are prohibited for them, how do they get salvation then? Julius Lipner brings out these paradoxes thus:

The Hindu temple embraces a host of religious paradoxes: a temporal dwelling for the timeless divine; a multiple focusing, by virtue of its many images, of one underlying divine source; a descent into the spiritual womb or cave of the heart in order to emerge into the light of divine grace and wisdom; an earthly mapping of divine celestial dwellings; an ideal microcosm of the macrocosm of the world; a pure and purifying locus of life's various polluting. But it is more. It has always been a social centre for the worshipping community - though usually to the exclusion of 'untouchables' who have had to establish their own places of worship - whether in a village or urban centre. Great temples have been occasional and permanent employers with respect to innumerable

occupations - of many priests involved in temple ritual, dancer-singers, musicians, builders, carpenters, sculptors, water-carriers and sprinklers, cleaners, and a host of other artisans and functionaries (Lipner, 1994:279).

If this is the case, the lower castes, particularly labouring Dalits, contribute much more to the functioning of temple culture than the upper castes. So why prevent them from entering the temples?

Conclusion

As I have tried to show, Hinduism is full of contradictions. What the scriptures of Hinduism dictate is not followed in the true spirit by the upper caste Hindus. That is why they have invented the caste system in order to control the growing aspirations of the lower castes. But caste monopolies are not always tolerated by the lower castes. While the powerless among them meekly accept the dictum and dictations of the upper caste monopoly, when they come together they challenge the caste hegemonies in more than one way. Indian history is a witness to these types of challenges, for example in the form of Buddhism, the radical bhakti movements, Dalit movements, and through religious conversions from Hinduism to Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. In spite of many challenges a large number of the lower caste population are followers of Hinduism, and like other Hindus they also undertake religious pilgrimages for various reasons. But, while undertaking these pilgrimages they are never treated as equals by their upper caste brethren. Instances of caste discrimination can be seen in every religious setting. For example, in Hindu temples, the Dalits are not allowed to enter into the sanctum sanctorum. Unfortunately, people of the lower caste are treated as slaves even today. They are mostly engaged in the menial and manual work of the temples. And most of the time when the upper castes undertake a religious pilgrimage, it is the duty of the lower castes to look after their comforts by contributing their labour. Thus, whenever the upper castes become pilgrims, travelling the length and breadth of India, caste also travels with them.

Against all these odds, however, there is hope, for undertaking a pilgrimage there is a chance to meet the Lord. Pilgrimage for the lower castes is therefore centred on hope and hope alone. I conclude my paper by citing a reference from Moorhouse (1994:119) when he describes his chanced encounter with a band of pilgrims in Madurai, a temple town in South India:

Pilgrims were walking away from the city next morning as I was being rickshawed in from its outskirts. A long procession of men in saffron lungis strode behind each other in a disciplined file, their naked torsos smeared copiously with ash, every man carrying a bundle on his shaven head; but it was impossible to tell whether these were penitential burdens or merely belongings borne conveniently. They were eccentric figures in an urban landscape marching steadily off into the countryside, quite possibly to another holy place. People made pilgrimages the length and breadth of this vast nation, very often the hard way in order to increase their virtue, and because they had one day made a simple vow, on impulse, in gratitude, or because it seemed expedient to do so. In Trivandrum I had watched two men, dressed in a style alien to Kerala, striding purposefully along with staves, obviously heading south; they were from Andhra Pradesh, probably on their way to Kanya Kumari. People would travel in similar fashion from South India to the great Gangetic plain, simply to bathe in the sacred river then to bring back some of its precious water in a garish plastic bottle. Many of them hoped they might die beside Ganga Mai before they turned for home again; for such would be the best assurance of all that moksha would be theirs.'

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