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by

Birbal Rambiritch and Pierre L van den Berghe



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BIRBAL RAMBIRITCH and PIERRE L. VAN DEN BERGHE\*

In her recent book, Hilda Kuper analyzed the transformation and the gradual disappearance of caste among South African Hindus.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the present study is to document her findings in greater detail by studying the caste situation in a Natal North Coast community, which we shall call Caneville.<sup>2</sup> By concentrating on a specific community, we hope to gain in detail and precision what we lose in scope. More specifically, we intend to analyze the local caste situation, taking as our point of departure the main characteristics of the classical Hindu caste system, namely:

- (1) membership by birth and for life;
- (2) hierarchical ordering;
- (3) commensality restrictions and dietary rules;
- (4) defilement rules;
- (5) religious sanctions and disabilities;
- (6) the *panchayat*;
- (7) occupational specialization;
- (8) the use of caste names;
- (9) endogamy.

(1) With some exceptions such as out-casting, caste membership in the classical Hindu system is ascribed by birth and cannot be changed. In Caneville, as in the rest of South Africa, and indeed in India, conversion to Christianity and Islam has often

been used as a method of escaping low caste status. Among the Urdu-speaking Muslims many are known to be recent converts of low caste origin. The same applies to the few Christians. Even among Christians and Muslims, however, low caste origin may be a barrier to intermarriage. Another method of escaping low caste status is the dropping of caste names accompanied by the adoption of a non-caste surname. This process will be analyzed later in the paper. In the absence of functioning *panchayats* in Caneville, the penalty of out-casting for breach of caste rules is non-existent.

(2) The importance of caste as a hierarchical factor has largely vanished in Caneville. Few are aware of all the intricacies of the caste system as it was practised in India. The vast majority of local Hindus have no clear idea of the meaning of the four *varnas*, much less of their component castes and sub-castes. Caste hierarchy survives mostly as a vague dichotomy between the "high" and the "low" that coincides with the traditional Hindu distinction between the twice-born (*dwija*) and the once-born. Descendants of Sudras are said to be of "low" caste, while the Vaisya, Kshatriya and Brahmin *varnas* are called "high". Not only has the complex traditional hierarchy been reduced to a simple dichotomy, but even this low-high

\*Dr Rambiritch received his Ph.D. in Education at the University of Natal, and is a lecturer at the University College for Indians in Durban. Dr van den Berghe received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Harvard University. He is now a Ford Foundation Fellow and a visiting lecturer at the University of Natal.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Hilda Kuper, *Indian People in Natal*, Durban, Natal University Press, 1960, pp. 18-43.

<sup>2</sup>The present study is a sequel to a study on the effect of "race", language and religion on social relations in the same community. We are indebted to Miss Edna Miller for her help in this study. Knowledge of the classical Hindu caste system will be taken for granted as it has been repeatedly described in the literature. Cf. E. A. H. Blunt, *The Caste System of Northern India*, London, Oxford University Press, 1932; G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India*, New York, 1950; J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India*, London, Oxford University Press, 1951.

distinction is held to be important only by the older and the less educated people. The younger generation, particularly the educated segment of it, openly jokes about the inanity of caste distinctions and censures the older people for attaching any importance to caste. Of the four Hindu linguistic groups present in Caneville, the Gujarati (a small group consisting of a dozen Vaisya and Sudra families) are the only ones who are generally aware of the caste and sub-caste divisions within their own varna.

(3) Commensality restrictions based on caste have disappeared to all intents and purposes, though one occasionally encounters a case where some old conservative people have refused to admit Sudras to their home or to share food and drink with "low" persons. Similarly, dietary rules connected with caste such as the distinction between *pukka* and *kuccha* foods have ceased to be practised. Strict vegetarianism is not closely associated with high caste. Only four of the 25 Brahmin families are vegetarians. The only other group to abstain from flesh to any extent are the Gujarati Vaisya. None of the 23 Singh families (Kshatriya) are vegetarians. Abstention from eating beef is, however, still connected with caste, in so far as the twice-born generally abstain whereas many Sudras eat beef. Pork is eaten only among South Indians, but the practice is not connected with caste. Wedding meals are vegetarian and many devout Hindus do not eat flesh on certain days of the week, but these practices are not connected with caste. However, wedding meals are still generally prepared by "high" people, and Sudras, though invited to "high" weddings, still hesitate to sit down at table for the wedding meal in many cases.

(4) Purification rules are still carried out in a number of Hindu rituals connected with death, birth and menstruation, but these practices are not related to caste. Defilement brought about by contact with low caste persons and the notion of untouchability are unknown in Caneville as in the rest of South Africa.

(5) Religious disabilities connected with

caste are practically non-existent, except for the fact that priests in the Hindi-speaking group are still Brahmins. The Southern Hindu groups (Tamil and Telugu) have no Brahmins in Caneville, and their priests are consequently non-Brahmin. Initiation rites for the twice-born have survived only in highly modified and simplified form, and are no longer connected with caste. The tying of the sacred initiation thread is now performed in much abbreviated fashion at the time of marriage and is extended to Sudras as well as to the twice-born. Access to the four main temples is open to all regardless of caste and religion, though one author heard a Hindu Sudra complain about the participation of a Muslim woman in the *homa* sacrifice. A priest was heard to object to the chanting of the sacred *Gayathri Manthra* on the ground that this was a privilege of those who were initiated, but such objections are becoming quite rare. Two of the temples are mainly Hindi in their membership, while the other two are mainly Tamil and Telugu; but this linguistic distinction is not associated with caste. At one of the Hindi temples, for example, worshippers include three Brahmin, three Kshatriya as well as several Vaisya and Sudra families. The chairman of the Temple Committee at one time was a Sudra, and several of the committee members are Sudras.

Rarely, if ever, are caste distinctions defended on religious grounds. Instead, attempts are made to soft-pedal or explain away references to caste in the *Gita* and in the other sacred writings. Several movements of reformed Hinduism such as the Ramakrishna and the Divine Life Society have consistently opposed any caste discrimination, both locally and in South Africa as a whole. One might expect that these reform movements would attract predominantly low caste persons, but this does not seem to be the case in Caneville. Of the seventy-eight followers of the Divine Life Society, only fourteen are Sudras. It may be inferred, from the above finding that the reaction against caste is not confined to low-caste persons but cuts across the whole caste hierarchy.

(6) The caste council or *panchayat* has now completely disappeared from Caneville. Until the 1930's, there was a Hindi-speaking *panchayat* consisting of five twice-born members, who were also economically and educationally prominent persons. The *panchayat* dealt with questions arising from sexual misdemeanours, family quarrels, marriage and financial disputes. The penalties involved either social ostracism or fines in the form of gifts to the temple. In the 1930's, when a person who had been disciplined by the *panchayat* threatened to take legal action against the *panchayat* in the regular South African courts, the institution came to an end. The South African courts would undoubtedly not have recognized the authority of the *panchayat*, and, without legal support, the caste council would have become entirely powerless. The only remaining trace of the *panchayat* is when a few prominent Hindus get together annually to decide upon the holding of certain prayers.

(7) Occupational specialization by caste is found only in isolated instances. As Kuper shows, such specialization could not survive the conditions under which indentured labourers were introduced into South Africa and made to work in a European-dominated economy. Of a sample of 318 married men only thirty-one follow traditional caste occupations.<sup>3</sup> Eight of these cases are Gujarati merchants of the Vedia, Modvania and Kandhoi sub-castes who came from India as traders. Four cases are Hindi-speaking Brahmins who are either part-time or full-time priests. A further seven cases are Sudras of the Nao caste who ply their caste occupation of barber. One Chamaar (a Sudra leather worker) is employed as shoemaker. All five Maistris who belong to the Dhobi caste of washermen follow their traditional occupation. The remaining six cases are farmers of various agricultural castes.

Although the following of specific caste occupations has become rare (except for the Gujarati merchants, the Maistry washermen and the Nao barbers), there is still a marked tendency for Sudras to be concentrated in manual occupations (Table I). Excluding farming, 76.2% of the 84 Sudras are found in manual occupations, compared to only 23.8% of the 219 men belonging to the twice-born Varnas. There is, however, no significant difference between Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. The significant caste difference in respect to occupation seems to follow the popular distinction between "high" and "low". To summarize, caste almost never determines the following of a particular occupation, but Sudras as a group have not yet overcome the initial disadvantage of birth in a low caste. However, eleven Sudras hold professional occupations, five are in business and four are in clerical positions, showing that the caste disadvantage can clearly be overcome.

(8) The use of caste names as surnames is an important aspect of caste in South Africa. Many Indian immigrants were registered under caste names upon their arrival in Africa or adopted names which, although not caste names in India, have become associated with certain castes in South Africa. For example the name Maharaj, which in India is a title, has become a symbol of Brahmin status in South Africa. All such names that become associated with caste will be treated as "caste names" in this study.

In Caneville the use of caste names is clearly associated with high varna status (Table II). 96% of the Brahmins use caste names, compared to 91.3% of the Kshatriya, 72% of the Vaisyas and 10% of the Sudras. Again the major break is between the once- and the twice-born. Obviously, the use of caste names as surnames establishes a "high" person's status. The Sudras, on the other hand, have tried to

<sup>3</sup>A sample of 318 married men known to one of the authors was chosen on a non-random basis, to determine more quantitatively the extent to which caste occupations, caste names, and caste endogamy are practised. The sample includes all of the Gujarati families in Caneville, all of the Brahmin and Kshatriya families, and approximately one-third to a half of the Vaisya and Sudra families. The possibility of unconscious bias in the selection of cases is, of course, not excluded, but neither author believes that such bias would significantly affect the findings. As caste is a delicate topic, the information was gathered through informants rather than by asking the people directly.

escape low caste status either by using non-caste surnames or by usurping a high caste name. The surname Naidoo (a very common South Indian Vaisya name), for example, has been adopted by many Sudras who are jocularly referred to as "two-and-six Naidoos".<sup>4</sup> The prevailing attitude toward the adoption of high caste names, at least among educated people, is one of derision for attaching importance to what is only a relic of the past.

Among the Hindi, only Brahmins and Kshatriyas use caste names as a rule. The Tamil and Telugu tend to use caste names to a greater extent than either the Hindi or the Gujarati. It is only among the Tamil and Telugu that Vaisyas commonly use caste names in Caneville. There is a tendency for older people to use caste names more than younger people, showing, possibly, a trend away from the use of caste names. Of the seventy-four men over fifty-five, 74.3% use caste names, compared to only 53.1% of the 239 persons under fifty-five years. Another indication of the trend away from the use of caste names is shown by a comparison of generations. Of the thirteen persons in the sample who were born in India, twelve (92.3%) use caste names. Only 60.7% of the 196 people born in South Africa of immigrant parents, and 48.6% of the 109 persons whose grand-parents or great-grand-parents were born in India use caste names. These figures suggest a gradual dropping of caste names with each successive generation on South African soil.

(9) The most enduring and important single criterion of caste is endogamy. Indeed, the practice of endogamy is a prerequisite of the continuance of the system. To describe the rules of marriage of Caneville Hindus is a difficult matter for endogamy operates not only nor even principally at the caste or varna level. "Racial" endogamy, in terms of the four main groups recognized in the

South African racial hierarchy, is perhaps the most rigid, followed by religious endogamy, followed by linguistic group endogamy. Varna and caste endogamy operate, in turn, within the framework of the other endogamy rules applying to the larger groups. In this present paper, we shall only be concerned with varna and caste endogamy.<sup>5</sup> A further complication is introduced by the different rules of *exogamy* in the various language groups. The Tamil and Telugu groups traditionally practise a preferential cross-cousin marriage which tends to reinforce caste endogamy, whereas the Hindi and Gujarati regard all marriages with near relatives as incestuous. Both the South Indian preferential marriage rule and the North Indian incest taboo (*sapinda*) applied to distant relatives are gradually breaking down, but *sapinda* exogamy to the fourth degree is still practised in conservative families. The traditional North Indian patrilineal (*gotra*) is unknown in Caneville.

Varna endogamy is still closely observed. In only twenty-five cases out of 318 has the rule been broken. Of these twenty-five exogamous cases, twenty-one are among the Hindi, three among the Telugu, and one among the Tamil. In nineteen of the twenty-five cases of varna exogamy, the woman married "down". This is contrary to the traditional rule of hypergamy (*anuloma*) which allowed the woman to marry "up" in certain cases, but strongly condemned cases where the woman married "down" (*pratiloma*). When the varna exogamous marriages are analyzed by occupation of husband, an interesting trend emerges. Where the woman marries "down" contrary to the traditional rule, the husband tends to be of higher occupational status than when the woman marries "up". In eight of the nineteen hypogamous cases, the husband is a professional, compared to only one of the six hypergamous cases. It appears, then, that

<sup>4</sup>When asked about the origin of the expression, some informants say that it refers to the half-a-crown fee that had to be paid at the registration office to change one's name (though the actual fee is now higher), while others say the expression simply denotes cheapness, or the fact that such people are not pure but only half (as 2s. 6d. is *half a crown*).

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of "racial", religious and linguistic endogamy in Caneville see P. L. van den Berghe and Edna Miller, "Some Factors Affecting Social Relations in a North Coast Community", *Race Relations Journal* 28, 2, 1961, pp. 24-31.

new Western criteria of status such as occupation can effectively override traditional considerations. A woman of high varna is prepared to marry down in terms of caste if her husband is a professional who can offer her material security and prestige. Furthermore, the data show that varna endogamy is on the decline. 16.4% of the fifty-five men under thirty-five married outside their varna, compared to only 5.4% of the seventy-four men over fifty-five years of age. A comparison of generations confirms the decline over time. Three-fifths of the exogamous cases occur among the 34% of the sample who are born of South African parents or grand-parents, and only two-fifths among the 66% who are either born in India or born in South Africa of immigrant parents.

Caste endogamy is not observed to the same extent as varna endogamy. Of 308 cases where the information is available, there are eighty cases of caste exogamy. If the Gujarati sub-castes are treated as castes, then the number of exogamous marriages rises to eighty-five. As for varna endogamy, caste endogamy tends to increase with age, pointing to a gradual decline in the practice, but the generation data show no such tendency. There is no significant relationship between caste exogamy and the use of caste names. Of the four varnas, the Vaisya are the most exogamous, but this may simply be a function of the fact that the Vaisya have the greatest number of caste divisions in Caneville (Table III). The Tamil- and Telugu-speaking people tend to show a greater amount of caste exogamy than the Hindi and Gujarati, but this may again be a function of the greater number of castes represented in the Southern language groups (Table IV). Of the four Hindi language groups, the Gujarati are reputed to observe caste endogamy most strictly, a reputation which is borne out by our data. However, sub-caste endogamy is no longer practised among the Gujarati. Of twelve Gujarati marriages, only one took place between different castes (though within the same varna), but there were five cases of marriages

between different sub-castes. The Gujarati, who are mostly well-to-do merchants, have been able to preserve caste endogamy to a greater extent than the other language groups by getting brides from India if no suitable match could be arranged locally. South African legislation stopping all Asian immigration has now put an end to that practice.

The younger generation generally considers the practice of both varna and caste endogamy obsolete and ridiculous, while many of the older people, particularly the less educated, still adhere to it. While the trend is definitely away from marriages arranged by the parents and toward "love matches", parental approval is still sought in most cases, and necessary in the case of the girl. Caste and varna, however, are only two of the several criteria which determine the suitability of a match. Religion, language group and "race" are more important than caste, and Western status criteria such as education, occupation and wealth play an increasing role in marital choice. Caste, except in the Gujarati group, operates largely as a vague avoidance of "low" people, i.e. Sudras, rather than as a specific injunction to marry within a particular group. Even in this loose sense, the barrier of low caste can be overcome, if the prospective spouse otherwise possesses desirable traits.

*Interpretation: Caste, Values and Acculturation*

Our study generally substantiates Kuper's findings. As in the rest of South Africa, caste in Caneville is of rapidly diminishing importance. Indeed, for all practical purposes except marriage, it can already be said to have disappeared. As Kuper<sup>6</sup> showed, the Hindu caste system could not have survived its exportation to South Africa. For one thing, many traditional caste occupations became functionally redundant in South Africa. For another, the complicated dietary and defilement rules could not possibly be maintained in the caste promiscuity of the

<sup>6</sup>Kuper, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

sugar plantation barracks. In a very real economic sense, caste became a luxury which only the better-to-do Gujarati managed to preserve in South Africa. Furthermore, the *panchayat*, being deprived of any legal standing, could not effectively impose sanctions for breach of caste rules. To be sure, caste had enough resilience to linger on for one hundred years in spite of highly adverse conditions, though only in much diminished and simplified form. Our intention is not to trace in detail the causes for the disappearance of caste in Caneville, because the forces at work are no different from those described by Kuper for South Africa as a whole. We want, rather, to relate Hindu attitudes toward caste to the problem of values and acculturation.

From the time of their arrival in Natal, Hindu immigrants have been "sandwiched in" between two broad cultural streams: the dominant Western culture and the conquered African one. Local conditions shattered many aspects of Hindu culture, notably the caste system, and made for gradual acculturation to the Western way of life. African culture was totally foreign to the immigrants and had nothing to offer them, since the Africans were in the completely powerless position of a vanquished people. The politically and economically dominant Western culture imposed its language and its system of education with the consequence that the vast majority of young Hindus are now Westernized in every respect except religion. Of course, this acculturation has not only been one-way. One must only think of what may be South Africa's greatest contribution to world culture: the development of Satyagraha and passive resistance. There have been, however, two important forces that went against the main trend toward Westernization. The first one is what might be called "cultural pride", i.e. the consciousness of coming from an ancient and rich cultural tradition. This factor made for the conscious retention of some visible symbols of Indian culture such as dress, cooking and religious ritual. The second main force operating against Westernization has been

rejection by the dominant White group. This rejection has, in fact, made a "racial" group out of South Africans of Indian origin, whether Muslim, Christian or Hindu, and has created a degree of cohesion among Indians (as shown for example in political organizations) such as would not have existed otherwise.

Attitudes toward caste bring the problem of acculturation and values in particularly sharp focus. Hindu opposition to caste distinctions is largely a function of having adopted Western values of individualism, democracy, and achievement on the basis of merit. Of course, reform movements within Hinduism have also strongly opposed caste distinctions, but these movements are themselves, at least partly, an attempt to achieve a synthesis of Hinduism and Western values. The local variant of Western European culture in South Africa has, however, instituted a quasi-caste system based on pigmentation. The South African Hindu thus finds himself in the paradoxical position of rejecting the caste system because he has adopted general Western values, and of being denied acceptance into the local group which claims to represent Western culture because that group has entrenched a quasi-caste system based on the antithesis of Western values. Even conversion to Christianity (contrary to what has generally happened elsewhere in the world) does not, in any way, facilitate access to the dominant White group.

The recent revival of interest in Indian culture among South African Hindus has probably been fostered by the rejective attitudes of the Whites as well as by the political independence of India. In this revival, the value of tolerance which underlies the basic philosophy of both Christianity and Hinduism is being "rediscovered". Both religions have produced a similar aberration in the form of a caste or quasi-caste system, and both aberrations have met in South Africa. The Hindu caste system is already moribund under the impact of Western values. It seems probable that the colour caste system will follow suit.

**Table I:** Varna and Occupation of Husbands (frequencies)

<i>Varna</i>	<i>OCCUPATION</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>Profes- sional</i>	<i>Busi- ness</i>	<i>Cleri- cal</i>	<i>Skilled Manual</i>	<i>Unskilled Manual</i>	<i>Farmers</i>	
Brahmin .. ..	7	2	3	8	1	4	25
Kshatriya .. ..	1	4	8	7	1	2	23
Vaisya .. .. .	42	28	32	50	25	5	182
Sudra .. .. .	11	5	4	41	23	4	88
<b>Total .. .. .</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>318</b>

**Table II:** Varna of Husband and Use of Caste Names (frequencies)

<i>Varna</i>	<i>Use Caste Name</i>	<i>Do not use Caste Name</i>	<i>Total</i>
Brahmins .. .. .	24	1	25
Kshatriya .. .. .	21	2	23
Vaisya .. .. .	131	51	182
Sudra .. .. .	8	80	88
<b>Total .. .. .</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>318</b>



**Table III:** Varnas, Castes, and Language Groups in the Caneville Sample (frequencies)

<i>Language Group</i>	<i>Varna</i>	<i>Caste</i>	<i>Traditional Occupation</i>
Hindi (144)	Brahmin (25) Kshatriya (23) Vaisya (41)	Kurmi (19) Koiri (4) Aheer (5) Kohar (13)	Priests and teachers Warriors and rulers Peasant Peasant Dairy farmer Potter
	Sudra (55)	Nao* (14) Chamaar (41)	Barber Menial worker
Gujarati (12)	Vaisya (9)	Bania (5) Soni (4)	Merchant Jeweller
	Sudra (3)	Kumbhar (3)	Potter
Tamil and Telugu (157)	Vaisya (132)	Moodley (11) Padayachee† (3) Pillay (high) (9) Chetty (7) Naidoo (64) Naicker (4) Reddy (7) Govender (27)	Peasant Peasant Shepherd Potter Peasant Peasant Peasant Peasant
	Sudra (30)	Pillay (low) (24) Pandaram (1) Maistry (5)	Menial worker Sudra Priest Lauderer

\*The Naos, though considered as Sudras in India because of their defiling occupation are generally regarded as Vaisyas in Caneville.

†The Padayachee claim Kshatriya status.

**Table IV:** Caste Endogamy, Language Group and Varna (frequencies)

<i>Language Group</i>	<i>Varna</i>	<i>Caste Endogamy</i>	<i>Caste Exogamy</i>	<i>Total</i>
Hindi	Brahmin	23	0	23
	Kshatriya	21	2	23
	Vaisya	20	19	39
	Sudra	43	9	52
Gujarati	Vaisya	8	1	9
	Sudra	3	0	3
Tamil and Telugu	Vaisya	83	46	129
	Sudra	27	3	30
All Languages	Brahmin	23	0	23
	Kshatriya	21	2	23
	Vaisya	111	66	177
	Sudra	73	12	85
Total		228	80	308*

\* In ten cases the information was not available.