

The most distinctive feature of Hinduism on the social side is the caste system. All the elements which have gone into the making of caste are found elsewhere, but their complex resultant and rigidity in India are unique. Medieval society in Europe had many caste elements, the clergy, a hereditary nobility, guilds of workmen, and the peasantry. In the southern part of the United States there is a decided caste element in the relations between Negroes and Whites. A caste is an endogamous group, or collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership in which is hereditary, arising from birth alone; imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse (chiefly marriage, food, drink, and personal contact); following a common occupation or claiming a common occupation or both; and generally regarded as forming a single homogeneous community. Most castes are made up of many sub-castes or endogamous groups. The castes of Brahmins (priests) and Chamars (workers in leather) consist of over ten million each. In many ways it might be better to consider the sub-caste (the endogamous group) as the social unit, but the larger unit of the caste bears a definite name, has a definite cohesion, and since all the sub-castes of any caste occupy approximately the same place in the social scale, a man's social position depends on his caste.

Marriage is the chief line of demarcation and probably played the largest part in the formation of caste. Marriage may not be made outside of the caste or sub-caste group.

Occupation, which has been taken by some as the origin of the whole system, is important but secondary. In the definition of caste, occupation is said to be traditional because in many cases groups have been forced by accidents of history or by economic pressure into other occupations without change of caste. Large numbers of Brahmins, for instance, have taken up other occupations than the religious functions which traditionally belong to them, but still remain Brahmins by birth. Change of occupation, however, has often led to the formation of new castes.

Common origin is also largely traditional, is often a later fiction. But the great emphasis laid upon it does show that descent must originally have played a large part in the formation of the system.

The lack of commensality seems to be based on ideas of cere-

monial purity, on the thought of contamination conveyed by food and drink. In general only those who may eat together may intermarry. Elaborate precautions are taken concerning the cooking of food and those by whom it may be cooked, especially with food cooked in water. The sanctity of the cow eases off restrictions for food cooked with milk and ghee.

The caste groups are ranked socially according to the purity of their descent, occupation, food, and customs in the sight of the Brahman ideal or norm. Socially the Brahmans are at the top of the whole system. India is the only country in the world in which the priests and ministers of religion have been able to gain and to keep permanently a position of social as well as religious supremacy.

At the top of the social scale are the Brahmans, who number something over ten millions. Just below them come the groups which represent the supposed descendants of Kṣatriyas (nobles) and Vaiśyas (the larger traders and landholders), and the writers (whose origin is disputed). These upper classes form about ten per cent of the population. Noteworthy is the absence in India of any large middle class.

Nearly ninety per cent of the population consists of the following classes. First, the pure Śūdras, those from whom Brahmans will take water. Secondly, the impure Śūdras, those from whom Brahmans will not take water, but whose touch does not defile. Thirdly, between thirty and forty million who are variously called outcastes, untouchables, depressed classes, or *pañcamas*. The number depends on the particular "test" of untouchability chosen. Recently there has been a tendency to lower the standard of the "test" and to raise the number to sixty millions or more. These may not enter Hindu temples or be served by Brahmans and must live outside the cities or in separate villages. They are regarded as so impure that anything they touch becomes contaminated. They cause pollution by touch or even by approaching within a certain distance. In northern India actual contact is necessary to cause pollution. In southern India they convey pollution even from a distance. They consist of groups which follow what are regarded as very low and degrading occupations and, to a large extent, are descendants of aboriginal tribes. The name "depressed classes" is a misnomer, for most of them have never been higher up in the social scale. Even these outcastes tend to develop caste distinctions.

The lower levels are comparatively fluid. There is greater and

greater fixation of the norm at the top, since social gradation is based on the esteem in which the various groups are held by the Brahmans,

and since the Brahmans are strictest in their observance of caste rules.

There seems to be no tendency to aggregation, but a constant tendency to fission as one sub-caste splits up into two sub-castes.

No one formula will explain all of these caste groups. Some are evidently tribal or racial or local or due to descent, some are based on sameness of occupation, some are due originally to sectarian differences, some are due to crossing or intermarriage of different groups at an early date, some are due to migration or to groups of broken men outcasted from various groups, and some are due to change of customs or occupations.

Most of these castes and sub-castes are autonomous corporate groups which are organized to regulate their own affairs and

the unwritten laws of the group. They meet in councils to discuss group matters and to administer common law so far as it pertains to the group. So they have many civil and judicial functions and an almost tribal organization with definite and often hereditary officials. At times there will be councils of a whole caste at which all the councils of the different sub-castes are represented.



LOW CASTE TAMIL GIRL, MADURA  
Life is not so sad.

In the same way the ancient Indian village, whether it was a village of independent holdings or a village of joint ownership, was closely organized. But the village was not formed by a caste group. Members from a considerable number of caste groups co-operated for the maintenance of the economic structure of the village. Carpenters, potters, washermen, blacksmiths, barbers, and so forth were not paid by the job but received an annual allowance of grain or cash or sometimes a small holding of rent-free land in return for work done for the village.

Economically and politically and judicially such village and caste groups were practically independent. They played no larger political role. Change of ruling dynasty and reshaping of kingdoms meant little to them. The efficient caste organization and village organization did much to preserve Hindu civilization through periods of great upheaval and to give it some semblance of unity.

The history of the development of caste in India may be divided into three well-marked periods. Many accounts of castes leave the impression that caste began at the end of the Vedic period and has continued since then in essentially the same form. This is erroneous.

In the first period, that of the Rig Veda, the main line of demarcation was the color line drawn between the Aryan invaders and the dark-colored aboriginal inhabitants of India. On the one hand was the *āryavarṇa* "the noble color," on the other hand was the *dāsavarṇa* "the enemy or slave color." Color seems to have been the chief line of division during the first period, becoming less important during the second period, and relatively unimportant during the third period. Color and purity of descent were, probably, the main factors which led to the rigid development of caste, but other elements were amalgamated with this to form the present complex situation.

The first line of cleavage was the color line drawn between the Aryans and aborigines. But the Aryans themselves were divided into three classes which tended more and more to become hereditary. First, the Brahmans or priests whose function it was to sacrifice, offer sacrifices for others, study, and teach. Secondly, the Kṣatriyas or kings and nobles whose function it was to rule and to protect. Thirdly, the Vaiśyas or freemen, householders and property owners, who engaged in agriculture and trades and kept herds.

The *dāsavarṇa* became the Śūdras of the second period—helots, servile classes, slaves, serfs, workmen, and laborers. Between the

second and the third periods, agriculture and trade (at least when practised on a small scale) sank in social estimation and the Vaiśya tended to sink socially and to become Śūdras. In the third period only the larger traders and the larger landholders were considered to be Vaiśya, and many Aryans, because of the lowness of their occupation, sank in the social scale and became Śūdras or even out-castes.

The second period is characterized by four so-called *varṇas*: Brahman, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. Here the word *varṇa* is not to be translated "color" or "caste." The best translation is "class." These classes tended more and more to become hereditary. But during the second period hypergamy (women allowed to marry above their class) was widely practised. At first this was allowed within wide limits, but later was gradually restricted, and during the third period was forbidden altogether. At first children belonged to the class of the father, later to that of the mother. It is the classical Hindu theory that caste groups originated from such mixed marriages, but this theory can be only partly true.

It is the development of caste groups within these classes, the development of endogamous groups within these castes, and the wide extension of exogamy which form the most distinctive features of modern caste. Many modern groups will not marry within seven degrees on the father's side and five degrees on the mother's side. In the first period there seems to have been only some vague restriction of cousin marriage. The reasons for such wide extension of exogamy, for the formation of so many caste groups within the four classes, and the formation of so many endogamous groups within the caste groups are unknown. Probably the extension of the family into a large joint family, lines of clan cleavage, and tribal differences played a large part, reinforced by lines of occupation and the organization of trade guilds.

Some have argued that the development of endogamous groups is based primarily on that of totemistic clans (chiefly Dravidian) and that imitation spread upward. But it seems much more likely that the fixation occurred first at the top and was imitated downward.

The restrictions about food and drink and commensality probably go back to old taboos connected with ideas of sacrificial purity.

During the third period the division was no longer that of four more or less hereditary classes but a division into many *jātis* (rig-

idly hereditary endogamous groups). The final rigid fixation of caste groups within the four classes and of endogamous sub-castes within the castes, the wide extension of exogamy, rigid commensal restrictions, and the extreme development of the idea of contamination by touch seem to date from after the beginning of the Christian era. Some even go so far as to claim that caste in the modern sense of the word did not develop until between the seventh and twelfth centuries A. D.



WAYSIDE SHRINE AT BANGALORE, MYSORE  
Ceremony is in process

It must be remembered that there was not in ancient India any long-continued empire which might have helped to develop a national political outlook, crush tribal differences, and enforce universal laws and customs. There were rapidly changing and territorially shifting monarchies and oligarchies which were very superficial politically. The village organizations, tribal organizations, guild organizations, and finally caste organizations were left untouched and formed a stable element underlying the chaos of rapidly shifting and superficial dynasties. The one permanent force was the almost universally recognized religious and social prestige of the Brahmans. It is difficult to believe that without the Brahmans and their social and religious prestige the system of caste would ever have reached a closed form or remained closed as it has. The acquiescence and resignation of the other groups left the Braman-

ical system of caste as the one dominant and continuous force in Indian civilization.

The Hindu justification and rationalization of caste is that every man should be satisfied with the place into which he has been born and should be content with doing his duty there. A man has been born into a high or low position in society as the result of his own deeds in his past lives. All should coöperate for the good of society as a whole. There should be a restriction upon too great individualism and unbridled competition. Each group has a particular duty to perform in furthering the welfare of society as a whole. Men are born unequal and cannot be legislated into equality.

But the Indian system left two privileged classes. Power and luxury and the protection of society from enemies from without and the punishment of the wicked within belonged to the nobles. Learning and higher education and literature and priestly religious functions belonged to the Brahmans. Theoretically priests and nobles should live up to their high positions and responsibilities. The ideal might have worked well if all the members of these two classes could have been maintained at a high level of responsibility. In the early days these classes were relatively open classes and a man was regarded as a Noble or a Brahman largely on the basis of personal qualification, later they became hereditary classes depending entirely on birth (not on personal qualification) and tended, inevitably, to stagnate, to become contented with their established positions of supremacy, complacent and reactionary without constantly making an effort to justify their high positions. The nobles became more interested in the enjoyment of their positions than in their responsibilities. The Brahmans, as they spread over the country among the masses and took over the popular temple worship and lower forms of belief and practice, tended to become illiterate or relatively uneducated and unprogressive, interested in externals and the maintenance of their prestige and special privileges. Even today the higher Brahmans look down upon the Brahmans who minister at the popular temples and are considered to be Brahmans by birth only.

Vivekananda has said, "This system of division into different castes is the stepping-stone to civilization, making one rise higher and higher in proportion to one's learning and culture," and, "Every social rule is for the protection of the weak." This is still the gen-

eral point of view of the ardent Hindu defenders of caste. A noble ideal, if it would work that way, but for many centuries it would seem that it has ceased to function very actively. To the outsider the idea of coöperation seems to have been changed largely into that of exploitation and complacency. Throughout human history there seems to have been an inevitable tendency for purely hereditary classes to degenerate.

But failure or not, Indian caste has succeeded in maintaining a sort of unity in diversity and has preserved Indian culture through all conquests from without and through all the great changes and dislocations which have taken place within. Recently there has been a decided tendency towards reform, to loosen restrictions concerning early marriage, remarriage of widows, commensal and food regulations, and heredity of occupation, but the principle of endogamy remains almost as strong as before.

\* \* \*

In order to make clear the Hindu attitude towards ethics versus religion it is necessary to consider the relation of ethics to religion. Is there any essential difference between folk-customs, laws and religious codes except that for various reasons in various places some matters have been placed under the administration of the gods rather than men, while some have not? Are not laws simply folk-customs which have been placed under the administration of policemen and judges? Are not religious codes simply folk-customs which have been placed under the administration of the gods? Are not ethics merely social codes which have amalgamated with religion rather than its central and moving force as is so often stated? Is it not possible to have a high development of social ethics accompanied by very little purely religious feeling? Is it not possible to have a very strong religious feeling which is accompanied by a very weak social ethics? The charge so often made that Hinduism has no ethics worth speaking about or that Hindu ethics are essentially faulty just because of their lack of the strong central conception of a personal God who dictates one code of ethics for all men seems to me to be without much basis. There is at present no satisfactory treatment of Hindu ethics. Most of the books and articles are by writers who measure a relativistic Hindu standard against an absolute Christian standard, or by those who are so metaphysically minded that a system of ethics must be based on some absolute



metaphysics and have absolute and eternal validity. Hindu ethics must be treated from a relativistic and pragmatic point of view, rather by an anthropologist than by a Christian or a metaphysician.

Is it not the mystical experience (or a preoccupation with the supernatural) which is the fundamental and vital element, the chief motive power in every religion? The belief in the existence of superhuman forces or persons, an active effort to control these or win their favor or to come into communion with them, or to attain to some superhuman state are the really essential elements of every religion. The external ceremonies, the creeds, dogmas, and ethical codes are secondary accretions which go to make up the complex thing which every religion becomes as it tries to socialize itself.

If the Hindu remains in the world he makes a pretty complete synthesis of social and religious matters, extends a religious sanction over almost everything social, does not become latitudinarian in his social life, and makes little distinction between things which are social and things which are religious. If the idea of salvation becomes so strong that he feels it necessary to leave the world and to abandon social life altogether he tends to cast aside, pretty completely, social life with its perplexing problems, and to concentrate on a process of self-realization which has relatively few social obligations.

A mystical tendency may react in two ways. In the case of some men the experience may be so vivid that the world and practical human life may seem to be insignificant and valueless. Such men will abandon the world and seek to renew their experience as often and as completely as possible. They will become other-worldly in their whole outlook on life.

In the case of others the experience or the preoccupation with the supernatural may be vivid enough to be significant in their lives, but they still feel that the world is very real and important, that human life has great value and significance. They go on living their normal lives in more or less of a social manner, but they make a concerted effort to bring something of the superhuman into human life and to make human life approximate to their vision of the divine.

The first is a negative mysticism which results in a completely pessimistic attitude towards the world as it is or may become. The second is a positive mysticism which is optimistic about human life and seeks to improve it through divine inspiration.

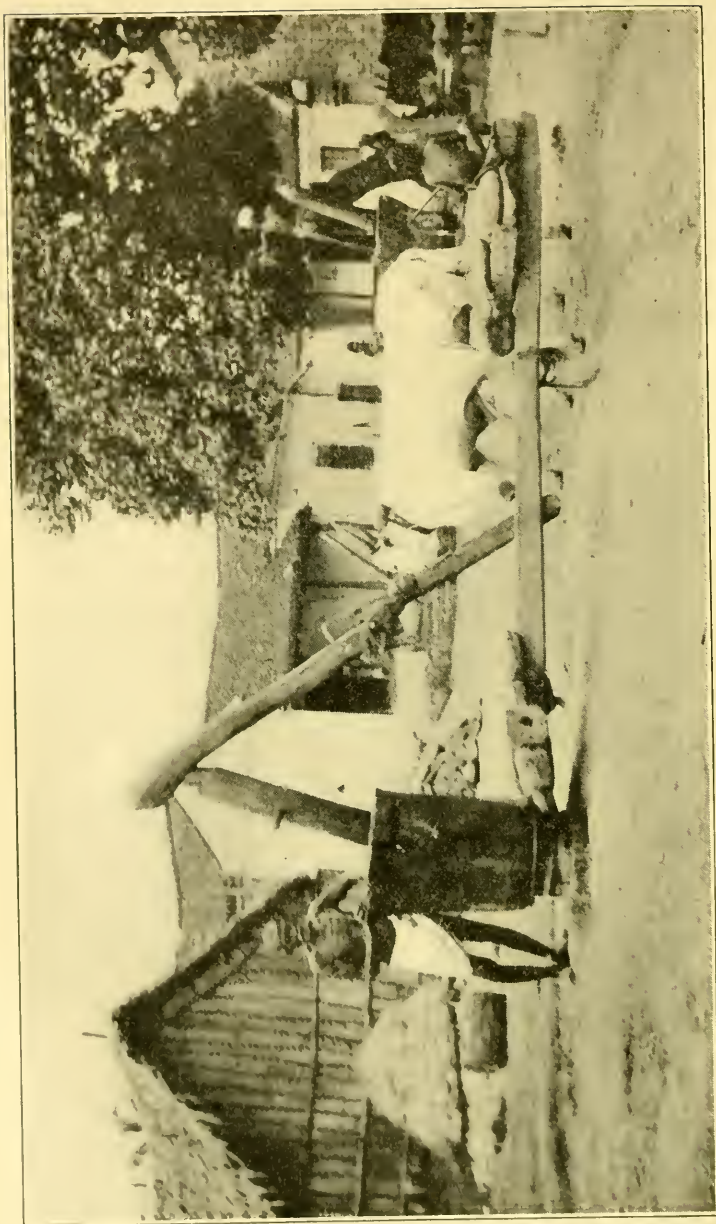
There are also those who have never had or think that they have never had such experiences, and whose conduct is not dominated largely by a preoccupation with the supernatural, but they are interested. They believe those who have had or think that they have had such experiences. They support them and follow more or less closely their teachings and imitate their way of living. Their religion becomes institutionalized.

Some others have had no such experiences themselves and do not believe that others have really had them. They turn away entirely from preoccupation with the supernatural and unknown and think only in human and social terms.

Religion is not all of human life. It is only a part of it like many other elements. Rarely is it found so completely demarcated as I have just described. It comes in flashes or is more or less mixed with other elements. Men are more or less religious rather than entirely religious or entirely irreligious. Religion has done as much harm as good in the world. It is like gunpowder or whisky. It is not good or bad in itself. The goodness or badness depends on the use which is made of it. There is no other valid criterion. The Hindus, on the whole, have been and are relatively more religious than western peoples. Either permanently or in flashes there seems to be in India a greater preoccupation with the unknown and super-human than in the West. But they have allowed outworn taboos and old magical and animistic conceptions to settle down in a swarm over every detail of social life and to clog development.

India has had more men of the first type described above (the negative mystics) than the West has had, while mysticism of the second type has been integrated into social life with much less criticism and revaluation from the purely objective social side, and people have been much more inclined to follow with docility the old mandates. But the majority of people in every country belong to the third group. Their chief interest (in spite of occasional flashes of other-worldliness) lies in worldly activity. This is just as true of India as of western countries.

The very prevalent view that the civilization of India has always been completely dominated by a negative mysticism, by asceticism, and world-renouncing religions, that the Hindus have all been dreamy-lotus eaters who have been so engrossed with spiritual things that they have paid a minimum of attention to worldly



OIL MILL AT TRIPPLICANE, MADRAS

things is entirely false. There have been in India more men and women than in the West who have lived such unsocial lives, but they have never formed more than a small fraction of the population as a whole. In India such men live more openly than in the West, attract more public attention, and are treated with greater veneration by the people than such men would be treated in the modern West. If Christ and the Apostles could return to us and live as they once lived in Palestine they would today be treated as cranks by the majority of Christians in the West. They would form a queer quietistic sort of group which would be looked at askance by our institutional churches. In present-day India they would still be revered as saints.

There is in India a much greater preoccupation with religion and a greater reverence for those who live unworldly lives than in the West, but in general Hinduism has not been directed towards the leading of an exclusively spiritual life. The thought of *varṇāśramadharmā* (the duties of the various castes and the various stages of life) is at the very basis of the religious and social system of Hinduism. This involves the maintenance of the family and of social life, the keeping up of the whole social organization. Every man was supposed to carry out the traditional duties of the station in life into which he was born. The conception of a great body of monks who should lead a purely spiritual life apart from the world has never been at the basis of Hinduism. Most Brahmans never renounced the world as the Buddhist and Jain monks did, but remained in the world and performed social duties. On the whole a man was supposed to live in the world and perform dutifully all the works of his station in life until middle age or later. Then, his worldly duties done, he might become a hermit or a *sannyāsi*. The spirit of renunciation, however, was very strong in India and a place was found within the system for such men as decided to renounce the world before their normal course of social duties had been performed. Salvation, to be sure, was the goal of Hinduism but, nevertheless, men who without fulfilling their social duties spent their whole lives as *sannyāsis* really belong outside the main current of Hinduism.

The main current of Indian life has been that of trying to strike a balance between the claims of worldly enjoyment, worldly prosperity, and salvation. Although the last is considered to be the

chief and final goal of human life still the claims of the first two are not to be neglected, and bulk almost as large in the general treatment of religious and social problems as the last. The ideal is that of a graduated scale, not of one norm of conduct for all men. Social life is to be kept up not as an absolute duty but as a necessary step on the road to a later spiritual autonomy on the part of the individual. India has been no more successful in striking a balance between a purely spiritual life and a life of social activity than has the West. Only Indian social life has been more sluggish and more stagnant, and more of its best minds have renounced the world.

India has had a decided tendency to be subjective and unhistorical. Historical works are almost entirely lacking in Sanskrit literature. Indian culture has been marked by the predominance of monistic idealism and pantheism, by the candid recognition of the limitations of the intellect and the giving of predominance to intuition rather than to the intellect, by reverence for the past, by the belief in the sanctity of all life (non-killing), by emphasis on asceticism and renunciation, and on the future as against the present life, by the subordination of rights to duties, by the feeling that the human intellect is incapable of exercising any effective control over the forces of nature and over social and political institutions, and by the belief that these social and political institutions are to be maintained in exactly the same form in which they have come down from the past without a constant and vigorous effort to modify them and reshape them.

In all systems of religion we find constantly recurring conflicts of ancient tradition and later experience. One generation lays down dogmas, disciplines, and codes as universally true. Each abandoned fortress of theology has been walled in by hundreds of ponderous tomes of theology. These doctrines are accepted as true until criticized by later and broader experience and knowledge. Then a new synthesis is made. In the modern West this process has been rapid. In India this process of revaluation has been slow. It was much the same in Europe before the Renaissance and the Reformation. India is in many ways a contemporary Middle Ages. In India experience of life has been less varied and critical, and there has been less vital contact with other nations which had different points of view. The result has been more dead forms which have lost the vital significance which they once had when human knowledge was

less. They have become merely mechanical repetitions without real meaning. This is not so much due to the fact that Indian social and religious dogmas have made the people what they are as to the fact that the nature of the people has formed and interpreted the doctrines as they have been formed and interpreted. If Buddhism had spread to the West instead of to the East would we not have made of Buddhism pretty much what we have made of Christianity, and if Christianity had spread to the East instead of to the West would not the Hindus have made of Christianity pretty much what they have made of Buddhism?

It is curious that no matter what disturbances take place in China, no matter how chaotic the political situation, and irrespective of many seemingly brutal elements in Chinese civilization most critics have a persistent optimism about China while they assume a hyper-critical attitude towards India and predict no good of her. Would anyone urge that some western nation must take over complete control of China so that China might work out its problems under the peace and order of a foreign rule? I am much more optimistic about India and her culture. During several centuries India has been passing through a most depressing period of stagnation, and many critics believe that the energy which produced the great culture of ancient India has run its course and cannot be revived. There are at present signs of a renewal of energy. It looks as if India had vitality enough left to respond vigorously to fresh stimulus. If a little fresh air can blow through the sodden strata of Indian society the worst and most rigid features of caste and the cruder forms of image worship will gradually disappear, but changes in these matters will have to come through education and improved economic conditions, through greater energy and mobility in the life of the people. It would be interesting to see how the best ideals of Hinduism would work out under the impulse of a more active social life. They are not to be belittled. They have been formulated by much practical experience to meet definite social needs, a definite physical environment, definite tendencies of thought, and definite physical temperaments. The basic features of caste and the underlying ideals of Indian social and religious life and philosophy can never be demolished merely by metaphysical and ethical argument. If they are changed at all it will be due primarily to the development of a more objective and energetic life among the people.