BRAHMANS: THEIR PURITY AND THEIR POVERTY

ON THE CHANGING VALUES OF BRAHMAN PRIESTS IN AYODHYA

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"In our Gayawal society we find a peculiar situation. Actually only a few practice religion sincerely, most of them are showy. They just pretend to be religious minded people (...). They do not have time to think as how to obtain heaven. They are mad after earning their bread. To them prayer, worship, spiritual merits, meditations and shraddha all have become superfluous and showy - a means for earning their livelihood."
(Gayawal panda on his own community, quoted by Vidyarthi 1978: 106).

1. Introduction[1]

On the first day of a short field trip to the holy place of Ayodhya in North India I met an old acquaintance who said to me very excitedly: "we have defeated Gangaram."[2] The man I met belongs to the bhareriyas, a community of pilgrimage priests (pandas). Gangaram is the leader of the gangaputras, a rival group of pandas. He demands with the help of certain toughs (goondas) fifty percent of all the offerings given to bhareriyas by pilgrims, because he claims that the gangaputras have the exclusive right to the pandaship. In october 1982 some young bhareriyas put up a stubborn resistance to Gangaram, which resulted in a battle between gangaputras and bhareriyas. Subsequently the District Magistrate of nearby Faizabad intervened and denied both groups access to the riverside where the pandas operate until the rights to pandaship were decided upon in court. The incident to which my acquaintance referred had occurred just before my arrival in Ayodhya. A bhareriya had led a group of pilgrims about some temples in Ayodhya and had received part of the pilgrims offerings in these temples. An agent of Gangaram had demanded the usual fifty percent, but received only a sound

hiding by way of answer. It was not difficult to understand this man's excitement as he knew very well that Gangaram would not take this lightly.

The image evoked by this incident is one of a violent struggle for power. To the Hindu pilgrim it is a familiar scene, as it not only applies to Ayodhya, but to many holy places in North India, such as Benares, Gaya, and Puri. In all these places groups of pandas fight each other for the right to receive pilgrims and to serve them ritually. This situation does the religious character of Hindu pilgrimage little good, but the Hindu simply cannot do without the panda. He must have officiating priests, ritual specialists who can assist him in performing the rituals on the basis of their knowledge of the sacred texts. These officiants who perform the ritual on behalf of their client, the "master of the sacrifice" (jajman), belong as a rule to the social category (varna) of brahmans. In the places of pilgrimage we find groups of brahmans who are specialized in the performance of several rituals directly related to these places. Near most pilgrimage places holy water is to be found in the form of a river, a pond or the sea and the panda officiates in the ritual of the purifying bath.

Such is the case with Ayodhya which is situated on the bank of the holy river Sarayu. The most important ritual activities of the pandas of Ayodhya - like those of Benares and Gaya - refer to death and to the ancestors. One of these rituals is symbolic of the crossing of the Vaitarani, the dreadful river of death, guided by a cow which is held by the tail. Another important ritual performed by pilgrims near a holy river is the feeding of the ancestors by giving them pinda, small balls of rice or flour. The central ritual, however, is the gift-giving (dana), in which gifts meant for the ancestors are given to the pandas. One of my informants compared the role of the panda in this ritual with that of a mail-box: "you give him something and he will bring it to the right place." The ancestors (pitr) who are always present in a place of pilgrimage, are of an ambiguous nature.

The pilgrim fears their envy and discontent and at the same time longs for their blessing. By performing the ancestor ritual, in which he feeds the ancestors and gives them gifts, the pilgrim rids himself of his fears and acquires, according to the standard formula, happiness in this life and in the next. To gain access

to the ancestors he has to make use of the panda as an intermediary.

The pilgrim can therefore not do without the panda, nor the panda without the pilgrim. In the first place the panda receives a fee (daksina) from his jajman for the performance of the rituals. Moreover he takes possession of the gifts (dana) meant for the ancestors. There is a wide variety of possible gifts: houses, landed property, clothing, elephants, meals - in short, whatever one may wish to give to one's ancestors. The richer the jajman, the more he is expected to give. In the relationship between jajman and panda we are dealing with what are called jajmani relations in the sociology of India, i.e. hereditary relations which are meaningful within the context of the caste system. Since for many pandas the profession of panda is the major source of income, or in every case at least an important source, it is clear that the disputed claim to pandaship is not, in their eyes, an academic question but a question of life and death. To my thinking this circumstance is not sufficiently taken into account in current analysis of the social position of the brahman priest in Hindu India. The reason for this is that there is a definite tendency to restrict this analysis to 'traditional' values as recorded in the brahmanical literature. Due attention is often not given to the fact that value orientations tend to be affected by the process of historical change in which the ways people live together are transformed.

Before giving a descriptive analysis of the changing configurations formed by gangaputras, bhareriyas and their jajmans, I will summarize those views in the discussion on the position of the brahman priest which reflect most clearly the tendency I criticize.

2. The Brahman Priest: The Acme of Purity?

In his famous essay on forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies Marcel Mauss (1974: 53-59) discusses the brahmanical rules of giving and receiving (danadharma). He points out that there is a contradiction in the position of the brahman who - divinity among divinities - is superior to every other human being, but at the same time depends completely on the gifts of his fellow men for his livelihood. According to these rules a Hindu should regard it as his duty to give to the brahman. If he performs this duty he can be certain that he will be rewarded

both in this life and in the next. It is, however, better to give than to take, the acceptance of gifts means a degradation for the receiver. The relationship with a jajman is dangerous for the brahman, because it threatens his superiority. This is a fortiori at issue in the traditional paradigm of the jajmani relation, that is to say, the bond between the Hindu king and his brahman priest. Here we find the well-known rivalry between worldly power and religious authority in the Indian setting.

Mauss' student Louis Dumont acknowledges this contradiction in the position of the brahman priest, but is of the opinion that in India a specific historical process has led to a situation in which worldly power is subordinate to the religious value system, in which "purity" is the leading principle (Dumont 1970: 62-88). The ambiguity in the position of the brahman is solved by Dumont in the sense that power is encompassed by purity, i.e. power no doubt exists in society, but only at secondary levels (Dumont 1972: 114-119). According to Dumont, in order to understand the workings of the Indian caste system we have to bear in mind this primacy of "purity". Therefore, the brahman priest has the highest status in the hierarchy, and the only one who really threatens his superiority is not the king, but the world-renouncer, the ascetic, who considers the status hierarchy of the caste system, based as it is upon the notion of "purity", to be illusory. In the historical development of the rivalry between brahman priest and ascetic preceptor (guru) the brahman has adopted a number of ascetic values, such as, for example that of vegetarianism, and used them as his own status symbols. As a result nowadays the brahman, who behaves like an ascetic (without however really renouncing the world) has the highest status **within** the social category of brahmans (Dumont 1970: 33-60). In short, Dumont believes that caste is the fundamental institution of Hinduism, that the hierarchy of purity is central to the caste system, that the social category of brahmans has the highest status within this hierarchy, and, finally, that ascetic values may play a role in status-differentiation within the category. Power (differential control over the productive resources) is only of secondary importance when we are trying to understand the values and actual behaviour of Hindus.

Against Dumont's position objections have been raised from two angles: from the indological angle by Heesterman (1971) and from the anthropological angle by Parry (1980). Heesterman argues that

the Vedic tradition of the brahman estate itself contains a process leading to ascetic world-renunciation, for the brahman wants to free himself from his material dependence on the jajman. Because he looses his transcendence in this relation, he is degraded by the impurity of the jajman whose gifts he takes. Heesterman therefore sees an inner conflict in the brahmanical theory itself between the ideal to renounce the priestly profession and the material necessity not to do so. Parry applies this indological interpretation of the brahmanical tradition to the material he collected during his fieldwork carried out amongst the Benares funeral priests. These priests, called mahabrahmans, are specialized in the rituals that are performed from the point of death up to the point at which the transient soul is converted into an ancestor (pitr). When the Hindu dies he becomes a dangerous disembodied ghost (pret) till he enters the world of the ancestors. The mahabrahman is thus the specialist of the rituals from death up to the rite de passage from pret to pitr, whereafter his role is taken over by the pilgrimage priest (panda). The caste (jati) of the mahabrahmans has the lowest status within the category (varna) of brahmans, because he is directly involved in handling the polluting death which is feared by all. Although he is commonly avoided, even more than the untouchables, and feared as the representative of death, he is still a real brahman. Parry's point is that in the funeral rites the relatives give gifts (dana) to the brahman, regarding him symbolically as the representative and personification of the deceased. The idea, then, is that the mahabrahman **is** the deceased at the moment the gift is handed over. How, when we consider these data, can the brahman priest be seen as the acme of purity?[3] Parry answers this question by joining Heesterman in the argument that the social position of the brahman is contradictory because his pre-eminence, which is put in jeopardy by the jajman's offerings, is of a transcendent nature. The highest goal in life for Parry's mahabrahmans is, therefore, to renounce the priesthood and the dependence on donations so as to avoid the contradiction inherent in the priesthood. The central brahmanical value, according to these two critics of Dumont's position, is thus the ascetic value of renunciation, as opposed to Dumont's view that Brahmanism and asceticism are two opposite ideological streams.

It is interesting to see that in this debate both parties concentrate solely on the realm of values whereas they ignore the

varying social conditions for the production of these values. It would however be too easy to maintain that these authors have a static and a-historical view of Indian civilization (cf. Van der Veer 1982a). They all acknowledge a dynamism within the realm of values. Dumont (1970) believes that this dynamism can be found in the dialectics of brahmanism and renunciation. Heesterman, however, is of the opinion that the ultimate renunciatory values are transcendent because they have to provide a fixed point of reference, but that the contradictory consequence of this is that society, which is based on interdependence, has to understand itself in terms of a renunciatory idiom. Parry connects his field material to this inner conflict of tradition and in this way various kinds of social situations, both old and new, can be understood in terms of the dynamics of the value-system. The brahmanical system of meaning has its own logic which creates "knowledge about" and "attitudes towards" life. This view, however, seems to be sociologically sterile, because it does not examine how knowledge and attitude are related to material conditions and social activities (see Asad 1983 in his criticism of Geertz's definition of religion). More specifically, it ignores the varying balance of power between people and groups of people, and the value orientations connected with it. In my opinion such a connection exists and I will try to substantiate this claim by providing an analysis of the changing social circumstances of the pandas of Ayodhya.

3. Gangaputras and Bhareriyas

From the simple fact that Ayodhya appears in old Sanskrit texts as one of the seven places in the world that grant liberation to the soul one would readily conclude that present-day Ayodhya is of ancient origin. This, however, may not be the case, because the Ayodhya mentioned in the ancient literature need not necessarily be the same Ayodhya which we know today. We have good reason to suppose that the rise of Ayodhya as a place of pilgrimage is directly connected with the expansion of the Rama cult and the religious community of the Ramanandis from the sixteenth century onwards (cf. Bakker 1982). The settlement of militant Ramanandi ascetics (nagas) in Ayodhya in the beginning of the eighteenth century was essential to this rise (cf. Van der Veer 1982b). It is highly probable that in the centuries before the arrival of the nagas Ayodhya was already of some importance as a

centre for the brahmanical cult of the purifying bath in the river and the related ancestor worship. This early period is not of direct interest to us here, as the oldest documents I have found in the possession of pandas date from 1730 and pilgrim registers (bahis) have been kept only since the middle of the last century. These old documents are all concerned with gifts (dana) given by jajmans to their pandas. In them tax-free gifts of land, houses etc. are mentioned. It is somewhat surprising to find a relatively large number Muslims recorded amongst the jajmans which shows that the religious boundary between Islam and Hinduism was less marked in this period than we often imagine. Moreover, this seems to be an argument against the theory that Ayodhya could only begin to flourish when the Muslims transferred their headquarters from Ayodhya to Faizabad, and from there to Lucknow (Sinha 1957: 132, 133) - a theory which smells of Hindu chauvinism.

The documents from the period between 1730 and about 1850 all belong to a few families in one group of pandas. The members of this group call themselves gangaputras or sarayuputras (ganga is here taken in the general sense of holy river, not in the specific sense of Ganges; putra means son, and Sarayu is the holy river which flows along Ayodhya). These gangaputras live in the oldest ward of Ayodhya, called Svargadvar, just behind a row of pakka ghats, i.e. stairs of brick leading down to the river for the benefit of pilgrims who want to take a bath. All those families in the gangaputra community who are in the possession of documents from the eighteenth century belong to the largest caste in Ayodhya, the Sarayuparin brahmans, a regional caste (jati) within the social category (varna) of brahmans. These oldest families appear to have entered into marriage-alliances with families from the Sakaldvipa and Kanyakubja regional castes, so that nowadays the gangaputras form a relatively closed professional group which might be called a caste in its own right. Up to the middle of the last century the gangaputra was the religious specialist who was visited by the traditional pilgrims, namely, the rulers. I have found little material relating to this period, except for the above-mentioned documents giving the name of a jajman, the date of his visit, and an accurate description of his gifts. The fact that the documents from this period deal only with the powerful elite (rajas, zamindars) indicates that what we have here is the traditional paradigm of the jajmani

relation between secular ruler and his priests as described in the brahmanical literature. For the ruler the pilgrimage was one of many rituals in which his power was legitimized and his high status confirmed. In this situation he was dependent on the panda, while the latter was, of course, materially dependent on the gifts of the ruler. The brahmanical literature regards this interdependence as a threat to the superiority of the brahman, as is justly emphasized by, amongst others, Mauss and Heesterman. Sociologically this configuration can be interpreted as a delicate 'balance of power' in which each party tries to consolidate its own superiority. Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that the brahmanical literature sometimes regards the sacrifice as a contest between two parties. The brahman tries to show his superiority by accepting the gifts from the king-jajman with as much detachment as possible and by a strategic use of his power, which consists of giving or withholding his blessing and the use of powerful curses. The king does the same by giving or denying his gifts and by claiming an independent religious status for his kingship as an axis mundi and a replica of the cosmic kingship of a great god, be it Rama/Visnu or Siva. This claim is clearly an essential feature in the theatre-state of pre-colonial Hindu Bali (cf. Geertz 1980) and on the Indian subcontinent in Orissa (Rösel 1980). However, whereas in Bali "the courtconnected Brahmana was not ambassador to the gods for a secular ruler; he was celebrant-in-chief for a sacred one" (Geertz 1980: 126), the situation in India was not that clear-cut. A useful analysis of the social position of three key-figures in the Hindu social system is given by Richard Burghart in an article on pre-colonial Nepal in which he shows that king and brahman, as well as ascetic, used different hierarchical models from which they concluded their own superiority, but that at the same time their relations were guided by a reciprocal acknowledgement of the respective superiority within their own domain (Burghart 1978). While in these hierarchies religious status is of primal importance, we should not suppose too readily that the status hierarchy is completely divorced from the differential control over the productive resources. In fact, there has always been a fierce competition between these groups over these resources. And even if the brahman is materially (almost) completely dependent on the king-jajman we cannot speak of a degradation of the brahman who accepts the gifts. What remains important, however, is the

etiquette when secular and religious power meet. The brahman should appear not as a greedy, but as a detached and learned man, while the king should honour him without losing sight of the fact that it is only thanks to his gifts that the brahman **can** appear detached.

The most remarkable feature of this fascinating configuration is that it entailed simultaneously both a delicate balance of power and a strong element of solidarity vis à vis other groups in society. In the case of pilgrimage this meant that only the secular elite were recognized as regular jajmans by the religious elite of brahmans. Before 1850 the records show only elite pilgrimage, which clearly does not necessarily mean that other types of pilgrims did not come to Ayodhya. What it does mean is that a jajmani bond existed only between the elite. After 1850 pilgrim-registers were kept which point to a significant increase in the number of pilgrims (elite and non-elite) who made use of the services of the pandas. Until 1850-1860 it was not an easy matter to reach Ayodhya as a pilgrim. The roads in the Province of Oudh were dangerous and made hard going. Only after the Mutiny of 1857 did the British decide, guided mainly by military motives, to build a network of roads. At that time there was only one metalled road in the whole province, namely, the road between Lucknow and Kanpur. The British started with the improvement of the roads in the district of Faizabad (a core-area of the Mutiny) and likewise with the road between Faizabad and Lucknow. In this way Ayodhya became relatively easy to reach by road. In the same period the accessibility by waterways improved. Until 1860 a steamer sailed up and down the river Ghagra - the same river that flows along Ayodhya and is regarded there as the holy river Sarayu - to the provinces of Bihar and Bengal only once every month. After 1860 steamer traffic expanded considerably. Finally in 1872 the railway connection Faizabad - Bara Banki was opened (for details see Gazetteer of India, Faizabad 1960: 180 en 181). Thanks to these developments Ayodhya came within reach for a growing number of pilgrims and its catchment area expanded simultaneously. As a result, more pilgrims came to Ayodhya from more distant places.

The secular and spiritual elites together were not able to keep the pilgrimage to the pandas of Ayodhya exclusive. As far as I can see, the change in the old configuration is to be explained by the successful emergence of a rival group of pandas in Ayodhya

and the appearance of the British on the political stage of Oudh. When the pilgrimage to Ayodhya expanded because more people had the opportunity to make this ritual journey which previously had been an important status symbol for the highest status groups, a group of brahmans from outside of Ayodhya came there to enter the seemingly profitable profession of panda. This was, of course, a gradual process, the initial stages of which are still rather unclear, because the party involved claims to have lived in Ayodhya from time immemorial and is, therefore, reluctant to give information contradicting this claim. There are, however, clear indications that already in the first half of the last century this group attempted to obtain a share in the serving of pilgrims (see below). This group calls itself bhareriya, and is, like the gangaputra group, composed of members of several castes (jatis) who have formed a caste-like occupational group through intermarriage. Compared with the gangaputras this group is, however, much less exclusive. To this day a fairly large number of marriages are contracted with people from outside the group and between several castes which I am not always certain belong to the category (varna) of brahmans. In my first contacts with the bhareriyas they told me that they belonged to the caste (jati) of Srimalis, brahmans who are active in Gujerat as priests and pandas. This notion was abandoned after some time and instead they claimed that they belonged to the Gaur brahmans, a regional caste (jati) living in North India. The group is not confined to Ayodhya. Other bhareriyas work as pandas in various small places of pilgrimage in the neighbourhood as well as in famous places, such as Benares and Allahabad. Moreover, they go around the countryside, initiating people upon request in a sectarian doctrine by giving them meditation formulas (mantras) as if they were spiritual preceptors (gurus). According to one of my informants many bhareriyas live in nearby Bara Banki, where they are known as arapopo, people who speak loudly the truth (i.e. who do prophesies which come true). The people of Bara Banki are said to be afraid of them and give them gifts to escape their curses.

The bhareriyas settled in the ward Ranupalli and in the beginning of the twentieth century moved to the ward Cakratirtha when the river Sarayu changed its course. Just as behind the old ward Svargadvar where the gangaputras had settled brick stairs (pakka ghats) lead to the river from these wards. The bhareriyas were not adopted by the gangaputras, but remained outsiders till the

present day. They became gradually rivals of the gangaputras by pursuing the same profession of panda. This became possible when new groups not connected to the established gangaputras began to go on pilgrimages, which the elite, who had jajmani relations with the gangaputras, did not have the power to prevent. Power had come into the hands of the British, who had annexed the province of Oudh in this period and who pursued an impersonal and bureaucratic policy which was totally unrelated to the old inter-dependence of secular and religious power. The gangaputras did their best to protect their established position by asking their jajmans to intervene on their behalf with the British, but this was not of much help. When the conflicts between the gangaputras and the bhareriyas over the right to pandaship escalated and became violent the British could not remain outsiders and had to arbitrate.

A good description of the process by which the British became involved can be found in an exchange of letters which took place in Ayodhya in 1862 between the deputy commissioner of Faizabad and his assistant and between the latter and some pandits (learned brahmans).[4] The occasion for this exchange of letters was a request by the raja of Mynpore via his priest, the gangaputra Hanumanprasad, to the British to prevent the bhareriyas from putting up chowkees (wooden stalls used by the pandas to receive the pilgrims at the riverside; in practice not much more than wooden four-posters which are used by the pandas to sit on and spread their sacrificial utensils) at Janaki Ghat. The raja argues that it would not be suitable for him to exercise his authority in this case and asks the deputy commissioner of the district Faizabad to find out what is the common opinion in this case. The deputy commissioner sends thereupon his assistant C.R. Shaw to shed some light on this religious affair. Shaw asks three authoritative pandits from Ayodhya for their opinion. One of them simply refuses to give an opinion. The second, raja Ramadhin the elder brother of the famous raja of Ayodhya, Man Singh, argues that nothing in Hindu religion prevents the bhareriyas to receive gifts from pilgrims. The third pandit is the most important. This man, known as Umadatta, was regarded as an unparalleled saint in this period, because even the gods Rama, Laksmana and Sita treated him as their spiritual preceptor (guru). He answers Shaw's question by citing a cryptic Sanskrit text to the effect that a man who deprives a brahman of gifts given by himself or by

others becomes a demon after death who lives in a jungle without water. It would appear that Umadatta avoided making a clear statement so as not to deprive either of the two parties of the right to gifts. Later Shaw tried to get him to clarify his stand in a personal conversation. But all he learned was that Umadatta himself was jajman of a gangaputra and that he could only give his opinion if it would not be officially recorded. Nevertheless Shaw is able to reach a clear conclusion with the help of further investigations. According to his opinion, thirty or forty years before, i.e. 1820-1830, there had been no chowkees on the ghats and both gangaputras and bhareriyas already took gifts from pilgrims. The bhareriyas were, however, considerably weaker than their rivals and were regularly chased from the ghats. At this time the gangaputras began to put up chowkees, and they continued to do so increasingly during the last ten years before Shaw's investigation. When the British took over in Faizabad the rights of both parties were acknowledged, but the parties were separated by allowing the bhareriyas only to put up a hundred chowkees downstream from Ramghat. This right was disputed in the above mentioned request made by the raja of Mynpore.

To be able to understand the behaviour of the British we have to realize that the existing relations between gangaputras and their noble jajmans were of almost no interest to them. They wanted an independent, kind of canonistic, judgement on the right to pursue the profession of panda. Most important in this respect was, of course, the right to receive gifts on behalf of the ancestors. On this point Raja Ramadhin was of the opinion - and this opinion is still held by the majority of my informants to this day - that every brahman is in principle entitled to this, which means that the whole category (varna) of brahmans may pursue the profession of panda. On the basis of this opinion the British decided to allow the bhareriyas to work as pandas. They did, however, acknowledge, on account of perpetual use, the existing rights to parts of the ghats leading to the river which were in the hands of the gangaputras. The bhareriyas, as a result, only got rights to those parts of the kaccha ghats (i.e. sandy banks of the river) which were not yet occupied by the gangaputras, but thereby they had obtained a place in the pilgrimage system of Ayodhya.

The old configuration of gangaputras and elite jajmans now gradually made place for a new one in which gangaputras and

bhareriyas formed a relationship of established and outsiders, while the group of jajmans grew, for both parties. In this transition external factors were important such as the improved accessibility of Ayodhya and the change in the political structure of Oudh with the expanding influence of the British colonial state on all levels of Indian society. The gangaputras could behave as established priests thanks to their monopoly of those brick stairs leading to the river (pakka ghats) which were most centrally located and, therefore, very easy for the pilgrims to reach. In this transitional period the group distinguished itself more explicitly from the other Sarayuparin brahmans by trying as much as possible to marry within the group and by adopting as few brahmans as possible from outside. Some lineages having run out, the group is at present limited to nineteen families and shows what is called by Elias (1965) a distinguishing charisma i.e. an internalization of social values which renders them in their own eyes superior to the bhareriyas. The latter are accused of receiving corrumpating gifts (dana) which are intended to avert the inauspicious workings of some planets. Further the bhareriyas, who smoke Indian cigarettes (bidis) and drink alcohol, are accused of behaving in a manner unworthy of brahmans. The bhareriyas have been much less able to close the ranks and have grown to a group of about 400 families, the internal cohesion of which is too small to come to a far-reaching control of behaviour.

Because of the growing number of pilgrims visiting Ayodhya the trade of the gangaputras expanded in such a way that they could engage other brahmans, amongst whom also bhareriyas, to work as their agents (gomasthas) at the riverside. Those bhareriyas who had obtained rights to parts of the sandy banks downstream from Ramghat were also very successful, because the steamer that began a regular service between Ayodhya, Bihar and Bengal after 1860 moored here. This situation was even improved when the railway to Faizabad was extended to the river Sarayu near the place from which the steamer departed. The bhareriyas initially addressed themselves to the pilgrims who came to Ayodhya both for their first time and as the first of their family. The bhareriyas made use of their extensive caste connections with the hinterland of Ayodhya and got agents to form groups of pilgrims from different villages and bring these to them. The gangaputras followed a different strategy by requesting their noble jajmans to provide them with documents which stated that they were the pandas for

pilgrims coming from the domains of the respective rulers. In this way they created as it were, pilgrimage domains which were territorially demarcated. Gradually, however, they too were forced to make use of agents to gather pilgrims from the rural areas.

The relations between pandas and pilgrims have become more business-like. To be sure, till far into our century jajmani relations are still contracted, but they are recorded in registers (bahis) which serve as proof of these jajmani relations for members of the family who visit Ayodhya without knowing their panda. The etiquette, necessary in the former configuration of a rich and powerful jajman and his panda is now eroding and instead the panda behaves like a businessman who employs agents for the performance of rituals, and who only deals personally with a jajman when he expects to receive considerable gifts (dana). Jajmani relations have not only changed in content, but have also become less important, since more and more pilgrims come to Ayodhya merely to make a brief contact with a panda to be concluded by paying a fee (daksina) for the performance of some rituals. This means a commercialization of the relation between pilgrim and panda which entails a decline in the reputation of the panda. Since the pilgrim is only confronted with agents of pandas who fight over the question of whose pilgrim he is, or, at best, he meets the pandas themselves who complacently accept gifts (dana) in their own houses and always urge him to give more, it is only natural that the pilgrim should begin to consider the pandas as arrogant money grabbers for whom he can have no respect. The pilgrim still expects to meet the ideal brahman, who behaves as a learned ascetic, but due to the change of the social conditions of pilgrimage he finds a greedy priest. Interestingly, the valuation of pandaship by pandas themselves is also diminishing with the eroding of jajmani relations and the growing internal competition. Generally, complaints are made about "the loss of belief" on the part of the pilgrims, but at the same time also about the disappearance of the age-old, high traditions of pandaship. With a mixture of envy and contempt they refer to the practices of the successful entrepreneurs in their own community.

The power of the bhareriyas in the competition with the gangaputras began to decline gradually from 1925. In that year the old station near the sandy banks dominated by the bhareriyas was replaced by a new one in a different place, and a bailey bridge

was constructed to span the Sarayu near the ghats of the gangaputras. The bhareriyas became increasingly dependent on the gangaputras when the latter took them into their service as agents or let them some plots near the river for which the rent was fixed every year. This dependence became total when in 1965 a concrete bridge was constructed across the Sarayu, for which the authorities had to change the course of the river. That part of the river-side which was dominated by the bhareriyas was drained and the only useful ghats were in the hands of the gangaputras. Due to the increase in numbers of the bhareriyas who depend on the income derived from pilgrimage and the limited number of plots near the river the gangaputras can ask an exorbitant rent for the plots. They skilfully exploit the uncontrolled competition between the bhareriyas for a plot. This new situation forms the background for the conflict described in the introduction. Bitter conflicts have, however, been very common from the beginning of the rivalry between gangaputras and bhareriyas in the first half of the last century. Attempts to stem these conflicts from outside are destined to fail. In 1953, for example, a committee of honourable citizens under the name of "Tirtha Rakshini Sabha" ("Society for the Preservation of the Place of Pilgrimage") was formed to try to resolve the conflicts which threatened to damage Ayodhya's reputation as a holy place. The members of this committee suggested distributing tickets of three kinds among the pandas: 1) for guiding pilgrims, 2) for lodging pilgrims in their houses, 3) for accompanying pilgrims to the river and performing rituals there. Further more they proposed to keep a proper record of all the pilgrims. The gangaputras protested against this scheme, because they first wanted a clear pronouncement from the committee that the non-gangaputras would not get tickets. When the committee failed to do this they went to the civil court, which declared the entire function of the committee contrary to the law on the grounds that the question of rights should be decided upon by the judge. The court seems for the sake of convenience to have forgotten that for almost a century already litigations had been going on without a clear judgement on its part.

In their struggle with the bhareriyas the gangaputras have closed their ranks. Because of the commercialization of the pilgrimage they can, however, rely less upon jajmani relations and, therefore, entrepreneurs in their own group have more opportunities to expand their business at the cost of others. One who

has been very successful is a panda who comes from Benares, but has married into the gangaputra community of Benares. Rumours go that by poisoning his brother-in-law he has succeeded in laying his hands on all the registers and all the rights of one gangaputra family. The other gangaputras fear his violence, but do not risk letting him down in public. By skilfully manipulating their fear for the overpowering number of the bhareriyas this panda has become the leader of the gangaputras. His access to external sources of power is a significant factor in his leadership. The growing internal differences in economic and political power within the gangaputra community do not fail to exert their influence on the self-image and the valuation of pandaship. Families that fall behind in this process see this with bitterness and try to find alternative employment for their sons, while those who are successful obtain such symbols of success as cars, television sets, and prestigious offices, as, for example, that of city father.

4. Conclusion

In Parry's analysis of the data he collected in Benares the highest aim in life for the brahman priest is to leave his priestly profession. Following Heesterman he interprets this as the consequence of the contradictory nature of the priesthood and the desire to resolve the contradiction. I think this interpretation is erroneous. As we have seen above, there is also in Ayodhya at present a tendency to leave the priestly profession, but nothing in my data points to an unchanging ascetic value as its cause. Rather since the middle of the last century there has been a fierce competition between the pandas for the monopoly of the priestly profession. Moreover, the pandas are not at all ashamed of their jajmani relations and of their acceptance of dana (gifts) from jajmans. On the contrary, they are proud of it and point out that they have ancient traditions and powerful jajmans. Both bhareriyas and gangaputras have a low opinion of the present situation and they idealize the past. They complain of the decline in the faith of the pilgrims, but they seem to mean by this the decline of jajmani relations and the related increasing commercialization of the pilgrimage. That pandas look for other professions has, therefore, nothing to do with the demeaning character of priesthood, but everything to do with changing material conditions. Important developments are the

commercialization of the pilgrimage system and the increasing competition between and within the two groups of pandas. Alternative employment is not more or less honourable, but necessary. This point is corroborated by a recent article by Pocock (1981) who did research amongst the pandas of the holy place of Dvaraka in Gujarat. Pocock stresses that the profession of panda is not in any way regarded as demeaning, but that, with a few exceptions, it provides an inadequate income. His main point in this article is quite the opposite to the point made by Parry, namely, that the pandas of Dvaraka do not regard pursuing a **different** profession as degrading.

By way of conclusion, we may interpret the brahmanical ideology of detachment while accepting gifts from jajmans not as a transcendent ideal of renunciation, but as a kind of etiquette which belongs to a historical configuration in which both elites, secular and religious, were directly bound together in mutual competition and solidarity vis à vis other classes simultaneously. It is difficult to substantiate this claim on the basis of few historical sources from Ayodhya before 1850. Findings from other important places of pilgrimage, such as Gaya (Vidyarthi 1978: 96-100) and Puri (Rösel 1980: XXVIII-XXXIV), however, bear out the same opinion. In the early period pandas were respectable in their detachment and safe in their jajmani relations, but due to the expansion of the pilgrimage system they were forced to behave as businessmen and consequently became less respectable. The commercialization of the pilgrimage system seems to be the central factor in the present configuration formed by two rival groups of pandas and pilgrims who refuse to enter jajmani relations. The reputation of the pandas has become exceedingly bad. When I explain to outsiders in India that I am doing research amongst pandas I can be sure to be warned against them, since they are regarded as being unreliable. Sarayuparin brahmans who live in Ayodhya but do not work as pandas complain about their difficulties when trying to marry their daughters to outsiders because people suppose that they are pandas. This unfavourable reputation has, of course, a negative influence on the self-image of the pandas. It is small wonder that under the present conditions many pandas of both groups try to secure a job in, for example, the civil service. Clearly, one need not to refer to unchanging transcendent values to explain this. The ascetic ideal which is so important in the value system of brahmans according

to Heesterman and Parry is in the present configuration in Ayodhya more or less the ideal of an independent source of income.

NOTES

1. This paper is based largely upon material collected during a fieldtrip to Ayodhya in January and February 1983 which was financed by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research. Without the generous help of Ram Raksha Tripathi this fieldtrip would hardly have been a success. I would like to thank Mart Bax for his comments on an earlier version of this paper. Derek Rubin was kind enough to correct my English. For the convenience of the reader diacritical marks have been omitted from the text.

2. This name is fictitious.

3. That death and the dead, and, therefore, also the ritual of death, have anything to do with impurity is disputed by Kaushik (1976). According to her interpretation, the ritual of death is above all related to the liminal phase between the world of illusions (life) and the transcendent reality (the world of gods and ancestors). The role of the mahabrahman is that of mediator in this liminal phase with all the ambiguity this entails. He is therefore not regarded as **impure**, but as **dangerous.** If we follow Kaushik, the mahabrahman as a specialist in liminality is a special case in the category (varna) of brahmans and the following crucial claim made by Parry (1980: 102) is not correct: "I stress that my observations here relate to the whole range of priestly specialists represented in the city (therefore also the pandas: PvdV) and not just the Mahabrahmans".

4. These letters and the report written by Shaw are preserved by both groups of pandas together with all the proceedings and judgements of commissions and courts relating to the conflict.

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