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## THE CONCEPT OF THE IDEAL BRAHMAN AS AN INDOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

### I. Introduction

Anthropologists often fail to relate the study of meaning to that of social action. However, when they concern themselves with civilizations, frequently qualified by adjectives such as 'high', 'great' and 'ancient', the problem becomes acute. Renouncing the study of this connection is a form of abdication for an anthropologist. I wish to submit that this withdrawal is caused by a feeling on the part of the anthropological community that they are 'outsiders' and 'intruders' in a field which has been dominated for so long by disciplines like islamology, indology, in short by oriental studies. In what might be an attempt at gaining respectability the anthropological upstart seems to be inclined to perpetuate the static and harmonious image of a 'Hochkultur' that he encountered in the works of the textual scholars.

The orientalist perspective in the study of Hinduism has above all resulted in a picture of Indian society as static, timeless and spaceless, and dominated by the Brahmans as guardians of the sacred order of society (Cohn 1968: 7) (1). There can be no doubt that this picture has haunted anthropological research on Hinduism. This is especially clear in the attempts to combine, in one way or another, the approaches of textual scholars and anthropologists. The most influential of those attempts has, of course, been that of Louis Dumont and David Pocock who declared that "a Sociology of India lies at the point of confluence of sociology and indology" (1957; see Dumont 1970: 2). Their programme was to develop a sociology of values and ideas, for which they relied upon the indological interpretation of those (Sanskrit) texts in which the Hindu "system of meaning" was laid down. In Dumont's work this leads to an orientalist perspective which coincides, at least partly, with the perspective of the learned Brahmans who were the authors of these texts. The ambiguity and confusion inherent in religious beliefs and actions, as found by the anthropologist in his field, are simplified by reducing them to a unifying ideology. Moreover, change and history also disappear from the scope of interest of the anthropologist, since the ideology is derived from texts belonging to the classical period of Hindu civilization, before the Muslim invasions. History itself, these authors assert, can only be understood in terms of Hindu ideology (cf. Dumont 1970: 147; Biardeau 1981: 9).

There are several objections to be raised against this orientalist perspective, but we will limit ourselves to two major ones. The first is that the structures of power and changing power relations are separated from the production and management of meaning. In fact, one of the major problems in the anthropological study of religion is the tendency to divorce it from the study of economics and politics. This implies the relative neglect both of the politics of religious organization and the relation between on the one hand changing religious orientations and experiences and on the other hand economic and political processes (cf. Van der Veer 1987). The question of how power creates religion or what the historical conditions necessary for the existence of particular religious practices or discourses are (Asad 1983: 252) is evaded. The orientalist perspective is a theological rather than an anthropological or historical one.

The other major objection concerns the use of an ideological model derived from the indological interpretation of Sanskrit texts. Reference to the textual tradition raises many problems. In the first place texts are generally taken from the Vedic and Classical periods of Hindu Civilization, i.e. texts dating from about 1000 BC to 1200 AD. The idea that a model derived from these texts can be applied to Indian civilization and society of all times and places is based upon the assumption that 'traditional' Hindu society was and is a kind of 'frozen' social reality. This assumption is clearly mistaken. The study of the textual traditions after 1200 AD show significant changes in beliefs and practices as well as considerable ideological debate. Already in the sixties the indologist van Buitenen (1966: 40) observed that anthropologists who wished to collaborate with textual scholars in their endeavour to understand modern Hinduism, should take the study of much more recent (vernacular) texts as their starting point.

Secondly, those who want to have recourse to indological materials should pay more attention to the nature of these materials. A text is always a social text, written from a certain point of view which pertains to a certain social group. By selecting texts one may obtain a partial view on the social and historical situation. Dumont, for example, is often accused of presenting the Brahmanical ideology without paying attention to other ideologies in, what Edmund Leach has called, "his mixture of Vedic ideas and contemporary facts." A solution to this specific problem would be the construction of more cultural models, deriving from several native ideologies, as found in the texts. Such a proposal has been made by Richard Burghart (1983), who argues that we should study the intra-cultural debate of the ideological representations of Brahmans, kings and ascetics whom he regards as the major actors in Hindu society.

This solution, however, does not account for what I am tempted to see as the most important problem that arises when anthropologists refer to the textual tradition. The social significance of texts in contemporary India seems to be too easily assumed. Those texts which are designated by indologists as important are often disregarded or are insufficiently known by the contemporary actors (cf. Fuller 1984). Moreover, texts do not lay down anything at all, and certainly not beliefs which are very diverse and are only exceptionally the subject of debate among theologians in such places as Benares. Most remarkable is the plasticity of the past in a literate society such as India. In India one finds a mixture of oral and textual traditions which might be even more variable than the oral history of some African societies. 'Ancient' texts can be made by the day as I actually observed in Ayodhya (cf. Parry 1985b), while traditions can be transformed in accordance with changing social configurations. To adopt the 'emic' view that there is an unchanging, scriptural source for all actual practices in Hinduism is a methodological fallacy.

Nevertheless, the orientalist perspective, developed by anthropologists and indologists in the fifties and sixties, still dominates the study of contemporary Hinduism. As far as I see it, the central task facing the anthropological study of Hinduism is to break away from the orientalist perspective and the intellectualist and theological overtones that have dominated it from the start. In the rest of this paper I will attempt to show that this perspective is misleading where one should expect it to be most fruitful: the interpretation of values and behaviour of the Brahman priests in Hinduism. First I will introduce the two major arguments concerning the social position of the Brahman priest which are both ultimately based on indological models, before turning to a discussion of field data collected among pilgrimage priests in North India.

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### A god on earth

According to an ancient cosmological myth the social organism was the body of Purusha, the primeval man. This original body was cut up to form four specialized *varṇas* or social categories. The Brahman *varṇa* was born from the mouth of Purusha and had the duty of teaching and studying the Veda, performing sacrifices for two of the lower *varṇas*, and accepting gifts in exchange. The Kshatriya *varṇa* was born from the arms of Purusha and had the duty of fighting enemies, protecting the other *varṇas* and offering gifts to the Brahmans. The Vaishya *varṇa* sprang from the thighs of Purusha and had the duty of producing the things to be sacrificed by means of herding cattle and tilling the soil. Finally, the Shudra *varṇa*, born of the feet of Purusha, had the duty of serving the other *varṇas* which were engaged in the sacrifice. The first three *varṇas* were called 'twice-born' or *dvija*, since they underwent a second ritual birth which enabled them to learn from their Brahman teachers (*guru*) the divine sounds of the Veda. The Shudra *varṇa*, however, was forbidden to hear the sacred Veda. In a way, the Shudra had to worship the 'twice-born' just as the 'twice-born' had to worship the gods.

In this Vedic myth the central position in the sacrifice, and by consequence in society, was taken by the Brahman priest who was like a god on earth and acted as an intermediary between the gods and the other two *varṇas* partaking in the sacrifice. In post-Vedic society the Brahman retained his elevated position at the summit of the social hierarchy. Most authors on Hinduism concur in this opinion. Dumont (1972: 84) writes that "the Brahmans, being in principle priests, occupy the supreme rank with respect to the whole set of castes." Moreover, the Brahmanical view of society, its scale of values, is often seen as the ideal model of Hindu society as a whole (cf. Biardeau 1981: 9; Obeyesekere 1984: 429; Burghart 1985: 9). Some even go so far as to argue that Hindu society is based upon the Brahmanical value system.

This opinion is, for example, advanced by Edward Harper in an influential article on ritual observances and beliefs concerning pollution among the Havik Brahmans of South India. Harper's argument is that Hindu society "is organized around the task of caring for its gods, and a division of labour among the castes is necessary to attain this end" (1964: 196). Since gods can only be worshipped by mortals of high ritual purity (i.e. Brahmans), this inherent purity must be preserved by lower castes who remove impurity by taking up defiling activities. Thanks to this social organization all members of the community derive benefit from the worship given by the Brahmans to the gods. A fundamental Hindu idea, according to Harper, is that "respect-pollution" provides a link between gods and Brahmans, and between Brahmans and other men. In Hindu worship (*pūjā*) the devotee's acceptance of the left-over food of the gods indicates a hierarchical distance between the divine and the human as well as between the Brahmans and other men. This line of interpretation is followed by more recent authors like Babb (1975) and Marriott and Inden. The latter write that the codes of Hindu worship require the existence of complex local communities of caste and that "the priest must be a male of the highest, most godlike caste available - ideally a Brahman skilled by heredity in the maintenance of ritual boundaries between substances and empowered to transform them" (1975: 985).

This might be said to be the first set of opinions, in which the Brahman, as priest, holds the supreme rank in Hindu society. The notion that the exchanges between men and gods in Hindu worship establish a hierarchical society, in which the Brahman is the purest being on earth, a kind of demi-god between men and gods, is in fact on several points at odds with observed reality and even with part of the Brahmanical tradition itself. In a clear exposition of

the Hindu theory of gift (*dānadharma*) Marcel Mauss argues that the position of the Brahman is ambiguous, because the gift creates a bond between the donor and the recipient: "The gift is thus something that must be given, that must be received and that is, at the same time, dangerous to accept. The gift itself constitutes an irrevocable link especially when it is a gift of food. The recipient depends on the temper of the donor, in fact each depends upon the other" (1974: 58). The ambivalence of the god on earth is therefore that, ideologically, he is presented as superior to every other human being, but that, materially, he is completely dependent on the gifts of his fellow men for his livelihood. Mauss adds that the Brahman's obligation to receive threatens his superiority a fortiori in the relation with the traditional sacrificer (*jajman*), the Hindu king.

The indologist Heesterman (1985: 26-44) argues that in the Vedic ritual texts an original pattern of the sacrifice can be discerned in which two parties exchanged life and death. The sacrificer is charged with the evil of death and, by means of the various offerings and the gifts (*dakṣiṇā*) which represent the parts of his body, he disposes of his impure self. Thus he is reborn as pure, while it is the function of the Brahman officiant to take over the death impurity of the patron by eating from the offerings and accepting the *dakṣiṇās*. In the later, classical, pattern of the ritual the Brahman has to safeguard his purity by keeping aloof from others and their gifts. The highest Brahman is the Shrotiya, one learned in the Veda, who does not accept gifts. According to Heesterman, the development of Brahmanical theory also led to an interiorization and individualization of the ritual which culminated in the institution of renunciation.

These arguments lead to a second set of opinions, in which the ideal Brahman is said to be a renouncer, not a priest. There seem to be two things involved here. First, the material dependence of the Brahman priest on the gifts of the king, which results in the Brahman losing "the transcendent status that formed his literally priceless value" (Heesterman 1971: 46) and, second, there is the transference of evil that makes the Brahman a recipient and remover of evil from the world, which seems even more to threaten his social position as the acme of purity. Heesterman's solution is that "as the representative of transcendence, the ideal Brahman can logically only be a renouncer, as indeed he is in the classical texts" (loc. cit.). Dumont (1971: 74f.) offers a different explanation, namely that the Brahman who accepts the gifts of the king only faces a fall within the social category of Brahmans, which is different from a fall from or of the category as a whole. This suggestion has been followed by Fuller (1984), who also focusses on the relative inferiority of the Brahman priest vis-a-vis other non-priestly Brahmans. According to Fuller, the priests' relative inferiority can be defined in terms of the lack of ideal qualities. This general explanation can be differentiated in relation to the different configurations in which priestly groups are operating in India. In the North the acceptance of gifts, especially in the context of inauspicious rituals, endangers the status of the Brahman priest. This point is illustrated by the material collected by Parry (1980; 1985a) on the Mahabrahmans of Benares. The Brahman priest is here presented as a kind of sacrificial vessel (*pātra*) into which gifts and food are put in order to get rid of evil (*doṣ*) and sin (*pāp*). In the South the priest's status is endangered by his lack of Brahmanical learning, when compared with ascetic Brahmans such as the Shankaracharyas.

In an earlier paper (van der Veer 1985) I have already tried to show that priesthood is an optional occupational identity for Brahmans. This does certainly not imply that it is a free option, since there are several social (political and economical) constraints on their choice. It

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should be emphasized that the status of the profession does not entirely depend on ideological factors, such as its relative purity or impurity, but also on economical considerations, such as the income one derives from it. Much of the discussion reviewed above, however, asks attention for a specific issue: the position of the Brahman priest at the receiving end of the gift-ritual. In this paper I would therefore like to focus on the social implications of the acceptance of gifts by Brahmans. My material derives from fieldwork among the Pandas of the North Indian pilgrimage centre of Ayodhya.

## 2. The Pandas of Ayodhya

### 2.1. Introduction

Ayodhya is a pilgrimage centre or *tīrtha* in the North Indian state Uttar Pradesh. In accordance with its literal meaning in Sanskrit of 'ford', the term *tīrtha* is used for places where a river can be crossed. Ayodhya is situated on the bank of a sacred river, the Sarayu, which has descended from heaven. Sarayu is a goddess, just like Ganga and many other great rivers in India. The river, then, is connected with heaven and the pilgrim crosses over to heaven at the *tīrtha* by, for example, making contact with the world of the ancestors. Besides being situated on the bank of the river Sarayu, Ayodhya is the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram.

The Brahman specialists of the pilgrimage centre are called *tīrth purohīts* or Pandas. The functional title *tīrth purohit* simply means 'priest of the pilgrimage centre' as distinct from *kul purohit* which means 'priest of the family'. Panda (*pāṇḍā*) derives from the Sanskrit word *paṇḍita* which means 'who has knowledge' and which is commonly used in North India to address Brahmans. Many of the North Indian pilgrimage centres have Panda communities. In Ayodhya there are two rival communities, called Bhareriya and Gangaputra respectively. They are in constant conflict over the right to practise the Panda profession. Both communities claim to be ancient endogamous castes of Brahman stock which have been exclusively devoted to the Panda profession from the times of Lord Ram, in a different world period (*yug*).

The pilgrim visits Ayodhya for a number of reasons, not all of them made explicit. The purpose which was most often mentioned to me was to acquire merit (*puṇya* or *kalyāṇ*), but an often more implicit purpose was to get rid of impurity (*aśauca*), sin (*pāp*), or illness (*rog*). In general, the pilgrim will not make a clear distinction between the worship of Ram in the Ramanandi temples and the worship of Brahmans, gods and ancestors on the bank of the Sarayu. To some extent, however, an analytic distinction can be made between on the one hand a spiritual complex, in which the devotion to Ram is central and which is dominated by Ramanandi *sādhūs* who are specialised in a specific theology and worship of Ram, and on the other hand a ritual complex, which is dominated by Brahman Pandas who are specialised in those rituals of Brahmanism for which *tīrthas* are appropriate places. In fact, this is largely an organizational distinction, which is of greater significance to the specialists themselves than to the average pilgrim, to whom all the ritual acts he performs in Ayodhya have an interconnected meaning. When he wants to worship Lord Ram in a temple he needs the assistance of a Ramanandi *sādhū* who acts as an officiating priest in the worship (*pūjā*) of Ram. When he wants to worship the river Sarayu on the religious area (*kṣetra*) of Ayodhya, or to perform an ancestor-ritual or take a ritual bath in the Sarayu, he needs the assistance of a Panda.

Most of the rituals, in which the Pandas are specialized are performed on the bank of the river Sarayu. The riverbank is parcelled out by the Pandas into a great number of plots on which they have erected their stalls (*chowkees*), often not more than a couple of wooden four-posters placed along the riverside in rectangular formation. The riverside is further divided in bathing-areas (*ghāṭs*) which sometimes have stone steps (*pakka*) or are simply the sandy bank of the river (*kaccha*). The Pandas, when they are not engaged in performing rituals, sit at their stalls and wait for pilgrims to come. Their agents (*gomastha*) are posted at the bus and railway stations to welcome pilgrims and conduct them to these stalls which bear symbols such as an elephant or bicycle, so that the illiterate pilgrim will also be able to recognize the stall of his Panda. Some of the rituals, however, are performed in the Pandas' houses. Often pilgrims stay in houses or lodges (*dharmśālās*) belonging to Pandas. Certainly the central ritual in which the Ayodhya Pandas are specialized is that of the gift (*dān*). The nature and the implications of this ritual will be the subject of the rest of this section.

## 2.2. The nature of the gift-ritual

There can be no doubt about the importance of the gift (*dān*) to the Brahman in the Hindu ritual system. In ideological terms the Brahman could perhaps best be compared with the sacrificial fire, and indeed this comparison is often made by my informants: "Brahma (who stands for the supernatural world) has two mouths: Agni (the sacrificial fire) and the Brahman." In this way fire sacrifice and gift-giving to a Brahman are equal. Moreover, inside the Brahman - as in other beings - Agni is present in the form of the digestive fire. The analogy with the fire-sacrifice is of course clearest in rituals in which the Brahman eats what is given to him, but more generally people tend to conceive of the Brahman's acceptance of even inedible gifts in terms of digestion (cf. Parry 1985a). Like Agni the Brahman seems a god in his own right as well as an intermediary between the supernatural and society. The sacrificial fire has to be worshipped as the physical presence of Agni, who is the same as Brahma, and in the same way also the Brahman has to be worshipped. These ideas - and I want to emphasize this point - are not just part of an ancient ideology to be found in Sanskrit texts, but are also part of the ideology and practices of my informants in present-day Ayodhya. Besides being equated with the sacrificial fire, the Brahman is seen as a sacrificial vessel (*pātra*). The word *pātra* is used for the Brahman priest. A modern comparison is made by equating the Brahman with the mailbox: "You give something to it and it is brought to its destination." It implies that everything given to a Brahman is brought, unseen, to its destination.

Jonathan Parry is currently working on the symbolical interpretation of gift-giving to Brahmans. In his ethnographical descriptions he presents two diametrically opposed views on the gift. In his book on caste and kinship in Kangra (1979) the gift to the priest (*kul-purohit*) is interpreted as having "the character of a charitable donation humbly offered to someone of superior status, whose condescension in accepting the gift allows the donor to acquire merit" (op. cit. 65f.). In a later article, based upon fieldwork among the Mahabrahmans of Benares, he presents a quite different view of the gift by observing that "as all the Brahman specialists see it, *dan* is bad not just because it subverts their ideal ascetic independence, but more importantly because the acceptance of *dan* involves the acceptance of the sins of the donor" (1980: 103). One could argue that only the perspective has changed from that of the donor who acquires merit to the recipient who receives sins, but it seems that there is more involved. In fact, it is a shift away from the point of view, developed by Dumont and several American anthropologists, that the Brahman as priest holds the foremost rank in Hindu society and that

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he exchanges material goods for spiritual merit to the view, developed by Heesterman, that with gifts evils and sins are transferred to the recipient and that a Brahman must therefore avoid gift relations. In the first interpretation social hierarchy is established by reciprocal exchange, while in the second the gift is unreciprocal. The Brahman is called a cesspit which absorbs, but gives nothing in return (2).

I would propose to consider the gift in its context: the relation between patron and priest and the nature of the thing given (cf. Mauss 1974: 58). We may begin with the relation between patron and priest, which is of course an example of what is often called the *jajmāni*-system. This system, being the 'traditional' or 'natural' economy of Hindu India, has been discussed in a great number of anthropological publications and I do not intend to cover the same ground yet again (3). As Commander (1983: 296-298) points out, the locus of the system is the possession of land: "For it is land or its produce that provides the crucial 'good' disbursed, upwards or downwards, by the *jajman*." It is important to note that the Brahman priest stands somewhat apart from the other service groups which are tied to a caste of patrons (*jajmans*). The service castes (*kāmins*) depend economically on the caste(s) of landholders, and this dependence implies an inferior status. It is, however, a meritorious act to give a Brahman rent-free land (*saṅkalp*, *birt* or *dharmārth*) and by the acceptance of such a donation a Brahman family may become economically independent. The balance of power between patron and Purohit changes decidedly in favour of the Purohit, when he becomes economically independent. Miller (1975: 131f.) argues that the *pandit* who is a free agent, receiving payment for specific performances, should be distinguished from the Purohit, who is tied to particular *Jajmans* in a hereditary relationship. The independent *pandit* has a higher status than the dependent Purohit. Economic dependence is seen as degrading and so it is better for a Brahman to have land than to be involved in a somewhat degrading dependence on a patron.

In the case of pilgrimage priests we should, however, add another observation. A central feature of the *jajmāni*-system as described in the historical and anthropological literature seems to be that it operates in a kind of autarkic village economy, in "a miniaturized economic universe" and that it falls apart when labour becomes mobile (Commander 1983: 286, 309). The *Pandas* have, however, always been working in a political and economic universe as large, in principle, as the Indian subcontinent itself. A *tīrtha* like Ayodhya is a "centre out there," to use Victor Turner's phrase, and its catchment area, though expanding in the last two centuries, has always been regional. Conclusions drawn from the general discussion of the *jajmāni*-system cannot therefore be easily applied to the field of pilgrimage. There is, for example, a great increase in the number of pilgrims contracting *jajmāni* relations with *Pandas* of Ayodhya in the nineteenth century, while the general picture is that the system lost its importance in the same period. On the other hand, given that *jajmāni* relations have become less important in pilgrimage during the course of this century, the implications are rather similar to what has been observed in general: money becomes more important than wage-in-kind, agents who act as middlemen between pilgrims and priests attain a dominant position in the new system, the relative security of the *jajmāni*-system is replaced by the impoverishment of many priests and the relative success of a few.

This is also no doubt significant for the relation between *Jajman* and priest, which is at least much less of a face-to-face relationship, in which considerations of relative status play an important role, than it is the case in a village setting. In a small-scale village economy with little occupational mobility a priest will feel his dependence on landholding patrons repeatedly in

subtle ways. In the large-scale economy of the pilgrimage system *jajmāni* relations are much more impersonal. The names of the Jajmans are entered into registers and the priest may see his Jajman only once a year, or even once in a lifetime.

Parry (1979: 80) points out that the Purohit's service is essential to the patron's status, so that the Purohit-Jajman relationship tends to be more perdurable than that between the patron and the service castes. Pilgrimage is clearly a status ritual which in the eighteenth and nineteenth century spread from "old elites" to "new elites." On the other hand, the status of the patron is clearly of importance for that of the Panda. In this connection it is enlightening to see the Pandas' view of their relation with the most important patrons, the rajas. They describe most eloquently their connections with the rajas of all parts of India who gave them huge gifts. These are clearly matters of great pride and it is with bitterness that they recall how they attempted to continue these relations after India's independence, but were rebuffed by the impoverished ex-royal families. Certain *jajmāni* relations seem to confer status on the priests as well as the other way around.

Finally, dependence might be to some extent degrading, but it also confers economic security. Patronage means obligations and rights. The priest is tied to the patron, but the patron also to the priest. *Jajmāni* relations are therefore ambiguous. They offer protection and a secure income, but on the other hand they are often felt to be the cause of inferiority because they imply a certain dependence on the resources of the patron. In the large-scale economy of pilgrimage it seems that the element of economic security is of greater importance to the Pandas than the element of inferiority which would be his daily experience in a village owned by his jajmans. In fact, *jajmāni* relations are highly valued among Pandas at present. This can be explained by referring to the changing organization of pilgrimage. The established Pandas with their fixed constituency of patrons are losing ground to entrepreneurs who make a better use of agents in directing new pilgrims to their houses and riverside-stalls. New *jajmāni* relations are still contracted, but the majority of the pilgrims only comes to Ayodhya for a short visit and does not want to be involved with long-standing hereditary obligations to Pandas. Nowadays most pilgrims only give a fee (*dakṣiṇā*) to the priest for performing some ritual on their behalf without becoming his regular Jajman. Money is also more often used instead of the customary wage-in-kind. In these circumstances one can easily understand those established Pandas who idealize the past in which their *jajmāni* relations implied a secure source of income.

When considering the gift in its context, we should not only pay attention to the relation between patron (the donor) and priest (the recipient), but also to the nature of the thing given. First of all, it may be useful to point out the differences between three prestations in the chain of ritual acts. First, we have the gift proper (*dān*) which, as we have seen, is considered to be equal to the sacrifice, secondly, we have the so-called *sangitā*, a small gift which is said to make up for a possible deficiency in the central gift, and finally, we have the *dakṣiṇā*, a gift which my informants interpret as a remuneration, a fee for the priest's services. The idea is that the priest has to be paid for his services so that he may be free to accept the gift as a sacrificial vessel. The Brahman priest has therefore two separate functions in the gift ritual: to act as a vessel and to officiate as a priest. In the first function he has to digest a gift on behalf of a supernatural being or on his own behalf as a god on earth, while in the other he presides over the ritual. This is, of course, a rather abstract distinction, but it has important social implications, since some Brahmans may act as ritual specialists (*karmakāṇḍin*) in the ritual and accept a fee (*dakṣiṇā*) for that, while refusing to accept the *dan*. Moreover, *dakṣiṇā* or fees are not only



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given for priestly services, but also as a payment for the services of a Brahman teacher (*guru-dakṣiṇā*).

The gift-ritual starts, like every sacrifice and like the pilgrimage as such, with the explicit pronouncement of the intention (*saṅkalp*) of the donor. The donor takes some unhusked rice in his hand, prays to the god he wants to worship, then announces the intention of his ritual and the name and the clan of the Brahman who will accept it. When pronouncing the intention the donor of course says what result (*phal*) he desires. The Brahman who officiates in the ritual has finally to declare that the ritual has been performed properly and thus "bears fruit" (*saphal*). It is therefore always perfectly clear with what purpose a ritual is performed.

There are different supernatural beings to be worshipped and propitiated as well as different intentions with which one undertakes a ritual. There is, in short, a differentiation in gifts which corresponds, to some extent, with a differentiation among the Brahman priests. The Pandas of Ayodhya make a distinction between two types of gift: auspicious (*maṅgal* or *vicārini*) and inauspicious (*amaṅgal* or *avicārini*). Auspicious are those addressed to gods, ancestors and Brahmans (as Brahmans) with the intention of acquiring merit (*puṇya*), a better karma, well-being, health, prosperity and all the good things of this life and the next. Inauspicious ones are those addressed to the ghost of a deceased person (*pret*), to the inauspicious planets or to the gods or Brahmans with the intention of warding off evil (*doṣ*) or getting rid of sin (*pāp*) or illness (*rog*).

The most unambiguously ominous gifts are accepted by special groups of Brahmans. The gifts for the deceased's ghost (*pret*) are accepted by the funeral priests, the Mahabrahmans, who are avoided by every other Hindu like death itself, which is probably not much dissimilar from the attitudes people in Western society have towards undertakers. The Mahabrahmans of Ayodhya form an endogamous priestly group with seemingly clearly defined caste boundaries. It seems that they do not have jajmāni relations which are comparable to those of the family priest or the Panda. Reciprocity with Brahmans who impersonate the deceased's ghost seems undesirable.

Gifts to inauspicious planets are given to Bhareriyas who are a much less clearly bounded 'caste' than the Mahabrahmans (van der Veer 1986). In Ayodhya they clearly aspire to the profession of Panda with its jajmāni relations, but my impression is that as long as they accept the gifts for ominous planets (*grah-dān*) they cannot have hereditary ties with patrons. The Bhareriyas appear to be caught in a poverty-trap (cf. Parry 1979: 66). They seem to be impoverished Brahmans who are forced to accept for their livelihood gifts no other Brahman would care to accept.

The Pandas of Ayodhya declare themselves to be (mainly) involved with auspicious gifts. They receive gifts on behalf of Ram, Shiv or the river Sarayu. More generally, the Ayodhya Panda is regarded as the human embodiment of Shri Ayodhyaji, the sacred centre itself. The pilgrim makes offerings to the total sacred field (*kṣetra*) which he visits: the object of pilgrimage is the object of giving or sacrifice. The supernatural beings as well as the whole area where they are thought to reside are powerful, have an influence on our mortal well-being and the pilgrims pray that this influence may be auspicious (*maṅgal*). Nevertheless, the Pandas do accept some inauspicious gifts in the context of such rites as *prāyaścitt-dān* and *tuladān*. The general idea in an expiation ritual (*prāyaścitt*) is that if the sins involved are very serious, the

gift has to be given to any Brahman who is willing to accept them. When no one can be found, the gift is given in a symbolic way to sacred grass (*kuśa*) which in such cases is said to represent a Brahman recipient. Some Pandas deny that they accept such gifts, while they accuse others of doing so. Other Pandas argue that it is not they who accept this kind of gift, but that it is the river Sarayu which absorbs all sins. It is clear, however, that this kind of gift is not easily accepted and that when it is accepted the Pandas will not give much publicity to it. In the *tuladān* ritual a patron (*jajman*) is weighed against a counterweight of gifts. The counterweight is given to the Panda with the idea that he absorbs the patron's illnesses. All Pandas I have interviewed made it clear that they would refuse such a gift, but outsiders told me that in the time of the rajas this ritual was sometimes staged. There can, however, be no doubt that in less conspicuous rituals pilgrims try to get rid of their illness by giving donations to Pandas and, since this intention has to be expressed, the Pandas cannot be taken unawares.

However, the commercialization of the pilgrimage system puts matters in a different light. According to my informants what was most important in the aforementioned expiation ritual was for the 'sinner' to get a certificate from the Pandas declaring that the ritual had been properly conducted. This certificate can be taken to the caste council (*pañcāyat*) which had imposed the punishment, so that the 'sinner' could be readmitted into the network of commensality, marriage and other relations in his caste. The interesting thing is that nowadays it is not only Pandas who issue these certificates, but also some abbots of Ramanandi temples. They are newcomers to this market and have managed to create a situation in which they receive pilgrims in their temples in almost the same way as it is done by the Pandas. This fact throws a curious light on an aspect of the theories we have discussed earlier. The Pandas do actually not appear to be interested in renouncing their priestly profession, but on the contrary, the so-called renouncers want to intrude on the pilgrimage market in the garb of Pandas.

Having discussed the gift in its context, we may take the following observations on the social implications of the gift-ritual. First of all, it seems to be clear that it is better to be a landholding Brahman who can - if he wishes - act as a free religious agent than to be a priest who is dependent on the material resources of his patrons. Such an independent Brahman can, without much difficulty, accept food when he is fed as a Brahman (*brahmbhoj*) and accept a fee (*dakṣiṇā*) for priestly services. He is, however, also in a position to decline certain gifts which he finds threatening. The ideal Brahman is therefore economically independent. The impoverished Brahman is in a difficult position. His material needs can force him to accept gifts which are dangerous. However, it is interesting to note that it is the most ominous gifts which are given as totally unreciprocated ones. The Bhareriyas do have a constituency in which they go from door to door, but they do not have specific families as their hereditary patrons. The same seems to be true for the Mahabrahmans who divide their shares in the funeral business according to days in the year.

A second observation is that the scale of transactions in a pilgrimage system is of a totally different order from that of the transactions in a village setting. The dependence on Jajmans who only come once in their lifetime to Ayodhya is felt to be rather less important than the income they bring to their Pandas. This may explain the real struggle to contract jajmāni relations in the nineteenth and twentieth century among Ayodhya Pandas. It is especially those families which had established positions in the system on the basis of their jajmāni relations that deplore the present decline of such relations, instead of being glad to find themselves at last in a position to follow the injunctions of Brahmanical literature. In Ayodhya jajmāni relations which are at present in jeopardy are highly valued by the Pandas.

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The nature of the gift-ritual has also changed. The great patrons of the Pandas were the rajas who gave huge gifts as a conspicuous ritual. The new elites, such as the Marwaris for example, are not interested in this kind of conspicuous status ritual, with the result that the scale of gift-rituals has declined and there has been an increase in simple rituals in which the Panda is given some fee (*dakṣiṇā*). Moreover, the complexity of the pilgrimage system has created a situation in which the agents of the Panda are a kind of buffer between him and the donor. Only in a few cases will a big Panda receive gifts personally. In most cases the agents will do it on his behalf. The greatest Panda of Ayodhya, Gangaram, demands fifty percent of all the offerings given by 'his' pilgrims to whatever agent or Panda. His only concern is income, not the 'danger of accepting gifts'. This might be seen as the cynical attitude of a non-believer, but this is not the case. Gangaram is in fact a very strict Brahman who regards himself as a 'good vessel' (*supātra*) despite his murderous reputation. Finally, as we have seen, others try to intrude into this economic field by performing expiation rituals, though they are not Pandas but renouncers.

### 3. Conclusion

"If we concern ourselves with activities as well as with values, with what men do as well as what they think, there are certain advantages to be gained." This simple statement was part of F. G. Bailey's polemical reaction to the position taken by Dumont and Pocock in their editorial in the first issue of "Contributions to Indian Sociology" (Bailey 1959: 90). It is surprising that a statement of such simplicity can still be quoted with some benefit, more than twenty years later. We have seen that there are two sets of interpretations of the position of the Brahman priest in Hindu society. The first is that the Brahman priest has the highest rank in the caste hierarchy, since he is the intermediary between the supernatural powers and the world. His purity and his position in the exchange system make him a god on earth. This interpretation is, however, easily contradicted, when we consider the function and activities of Brahman priests like the Mahabrahmans and Bhareriyas. Moreover, the relation of a Brahman Purohit, family priest or pilgrimage priest, with particular Jajmans who support him does not make him superior, but rather inferior.

Should we then follow the second set of interpretations which stress that the god on earth is not the priest, but the learned Brahman renouncer who refuses to accept gifts? To put it differently: Do the Pandas of Ayodhya actually model themselves on the ideal Brahman, the world renouncer, and do they see renunciation of the priesthood as the highest goal in life? Is the acceptance of gifts the cause of the relative inferiority of Brahman priests in Ayodhya? From interviews and participant observation I have never been able to discern anything having the faintest connection with the cultural model of the 'ideal Brahman'. The Pandas are engaged in a daily struggle for livelihood and their actions and orientations are connected with that struggle. Moreover, this is not a modern phenomenon resulting from a process of secularization, but it was already existent in the nineteenth century. When the pilgrimage market expanded and the British started to define the rights of participants in the system, the actions of the Pandas were directed at getting as large a share as possible. It was the positive right to practise the Panda profession which was highly valued among Pandas in that period. Its attraction grew with its increasing market-value.

Pandaship is a profession. The conditions in which this profession has to be practised have changed drastically in the course of the last century and a half. The acceptance of gifts is clearly an important aspect of this profession, but the sheer multi-faceted complexity of the gift as a ritual practice makes it impossible to give a general interpretation of its social implications in terms of Brahmanical ideology. We have to consider the gift-ritual in its context. All the elements of the practice have changed in the above-mentioned period: donors, recipients, things given and relations between donors and recipients. We should therefore not be surprised to find for example that the vanishing *jajmāni* relations with kings are highly valued among the Ayodhya Pandas, although this seems to be in opposition with parts of the 'Brahmanical ideology'.

As a conclusion, we should be wary of applying static orientalist models to the interpretation of the values and behaviour of Brahman priests in Hinduism, since we cannot be sure that the textual tradition is indeed the source of these values and behaviour (4). Instead we may pay more attention to what Brahman priests actually 'do' in ritual practices and the way in which these practices like the rest of their activities change in 'history'.

## Notes

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- (1) In this paper the term 'orientalist perspective' is used to refer to the way anthropological interpretations make use of indological constructions of Indian reality.
- (2) Most recently Parry (1986) has argued that this unreciprocated or 'pure' gift pertains to a specific kind of society, namely state societies with an advanced division of labour and a significant commercial sector as well as, most importantly, the belief system of a world religion. This is an important attempt to relate society with ritual practice.
- (3) It should be clear that the concept of the '*jajmāni*-system' as a system is largely a colonial and anthropological construct. I use it here only to contrast the position of the family priest in the village with that of the pilgrimage priest. *Jajmāni* relations in the religious context refer to the hereditary relations between patrons and priests.
- (4) This does not mean that much of what has been discussed above in relation to actual ritual practices could not be found in one or another way in the Brahmanical literature, as in fact

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is shown by Trautmann's discussion of this literature (1981: 277-293). It should, however, be clear that to find some idea in the Sanskrit literature which is similar to what is found in actual practice is altogether different from explaining the actual practice.

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Horst Krüger

## HINDUISM AND NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN INDIA

The irregular, contradictory, inhibited and deformed development of the socio-economic structure in colonial India had a sustained effect on the sphere of ideology. The existence and the continuity of pre-capitalist production relations account for the tenacity of life shown by traditional institutions and structures with their pertaining patterns of thought and behaviour.

In India the concept of pre-capitalist production relations is simultaneously related to the notion of caste. The far-reaching overlapping between caste and social structure notably in the rural areas caused the consolidation of the caste-like stratification by the social strata, and vice versa. The resulting traditionally religiously sanctioned miserable situation of the lowest strata beyond economic dependence made it possible, for instance, for the landlord to exploit their tenants to the utmost.

Another outcome of the caste system was that there was not only a gap between the exploiting, ruling higher and oppressed lower castes, but equally between the lower castes themselves with each of them thinking to be higher- or lower-ranking against the other.

Affiliation to caste played also an important role in the embittered clashes between the various groups of intellectuals waged for access to the different levels of administrative apparatus. There was a new type of caste-orientated and religiously substantiated consciousness emerging from the struggle of competition for education and jobs.

The diversified caste-orientated composition obstructed the emergence of a unified class-consciousness of the Indian workers. Many of them belonged to the lowest castes; the share of "untouchables" was especially high.

Although industrialization and other factors tended to bring about structural changes in Indian society, certain castes dominated (and continue to dominate down to this day) certain callings and professions while other castes were, in practice, excluded from them. This is generally true of industry, trade, government services, white-collar professions, and also in manual occupations. In Bombay, for instance, which was the main centre of Indian textile industry, "untouchable" workers were kept out of the weaving section of textile mills. And touchable and "untouchable" workers continue to live in separate blocks of chawls in Bombay, now as in the past (Sardesai 1979: 12). From the very beginning it was evident that caste cuts through class, just as class cuts through caste.

It is applicable to all social classes and strata in India prior to the first world war that they were directly or indirectly related to the backward, pre-capitalist agrarian situation. This meant that there was a continuous flow and influx of traditional ideas from this side. They did not