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A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization

M. N. SRINIVAS

THE concept of "Sanskritization" was found useful by me in the analysis of the social and religious life of the Coorgs of South India. A few other anthropologists who are making studies of tribal and village communities in various parts of India seem to find the concept helpful in the analysis of their material, and this fact induces me to attempt a re-examination of it here.

The first use of the term Sanskritization in this sense occurs in my book, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford, 1952), p. 30:

The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called "Sanskritization" in this book, in preference to "Brahminization," as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other "twice-born" castes.

Sanskritization is no doubt an awkward term, but it was preferred to Brahmanization for several reasons: Brahmanization is subsumed in the wider process of Sanskritization though at some points Brahmanization and Sanskritization are at variance with each other. For instance, the Brahmins of the Vedic period drank *soma*, an alcoholic drink,¹ ate beef, and offered blood sacrifices. Both were given up in post-Vedic times. It has been suggested that this was the result of Jain and Buddhist influence. Today, Brahmins are, by and large, vegetarians; only the Saraswat, Kashmiri, and Bengali Brahmins eat non-vegetarian food. All these Brahmins are, however, traditionally teetotalers. In brief, the customs and habits of the Brahmins changed after they had settled in India. Had the term Brahmanization been used, it would have been necessary to specify which particular Brahmin group was meant, and at which period of its recorded history.

Again, the agents of Sanskritization were (and are) not always Brahmins. In fact, the non-twice-born castes were prohibited from following the customs and rites of the Brahmins, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Brahmins were responsible for this prohibition as they were a privileged group entrusted with the authority to declare the laws. But the existence of such a prohibition did not

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¹ See "Soma" in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, XI, 685-686.

prevent the Sanskritization of the customs and rites of the lower castes. The Lingayats of South India have been a powerful force for the Sanskritization of the customs and rites of many low castes of the Karnāṭak. The Lingayat movement was founded by a Brahman named Basavā in the twelfth century, and another Brahman, Ekāntada Rāmāyā, played an important part in it. But it was a popular movement in the true sense of the term, attracting followers from all castes, especially the low castes, and it was anti-Brahmanical in tone and spirit.² The Lingayats of Mysore claim equality with Brahmans, and the more orthodox Lingayats do not eat food cooked or handled by Brahmans. The Smiths of South India are another interesting example: they call themselves Vishwakarma Brahmans, wear the sacred thread, and have Sanskritized their ritual. But some of them still eat meat and drink alcoholic liquor. This does not, however, explain why they are considered to belong to the Left-hand division of the castes, and no caste belonging to the Right-hand division, including the Holeyas (Untouchables), will eat food or drink water touched by them. Until recently they suffered from a number of disabilities: they were allowed to celebrate their weddings only in villages in which there was a temple to their caste-deity Kāḷi. Their wedding procession was not allowed to go along streets in which the Right-hand castes lived. And there were also other disabilities. Normally Sanskritization enables a caste to obtain a higher position in the hierarchy. But in the case of the Smiths it seems to have resulted only in their drawing upon themselves the wrath of all the other castes. The reasons for this are not known.

The usefulness of Sanskritization as a tool in the analysis of Indian society is greatly limited by the complexity of the concept as well as its looseness. An attempt will be made here to analyze further the conceptual whole which is Sanskritization.

II

The structural basis of Hindu society is caste, and it is not possible to understand Sanskritization without reference to the structural framework in which it occurs. Speaking generally, the castes occupying the top positions in the hierarchy are more Sanskritized than castes in the lower and middle regions of the hierarchy, and this has been responsible for the Sanskritization of the lower castes as well as the outlying tribes. The lower castes always seem to have tried to take over the customs and way of life of the higher castes. The theoretical existence of a ban on their adoption of Brahmanical customs and rites was not very effective, and this is clear when we consider the fact that many non-Brahmanical castes practice many Brahmanical customs and rites. A more effective barrier to the lower castes' taking over of the customs and rites of the higher castes was the hostile attitude of the locally dominant caste, or of the king of the region. In their case there was physical force which could be used to keep the lower groups in check.

The point which is really interesting to note is that in spite of the existence of

² See E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras, 1909), V. 237f; see also *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., XIV, 162.

certain obstacles, Brahmanical customs and way of life did manage to spread not only among all Hindus but also among some outlying tribes. This is to some extent due to the fact that Hindu society is a stratified one, in which there are innumerable small groups which try to pass for a higher group. And the best way of staking a claim to a higher position is to adopt the custom and way of life of a higher caste. As this process was common to all the castes except the highest, it meant that the Brahmanical customs and way of life spread among all Hindus. It is possible that the very ban on the lower castes' adoption of the Brahmanical way of life had an exactly opposite effect.

Though, over a long period of time, Brahmanical rites and customs spread among the lower castes, in the short run the locally dominant caste was imitated by the rest. And the locally dominant caste was frequently not Brahman. It could be said that in the case of the numerous castes occupying the lowest levels, Brahmanical customs reached them in a chain reaction. That is, each group took from the one higher to it, and in turn gave to the group below. Sometimes, however, as in the case of the Smiths of South India, a caste tried to jump over all its structural neighbors, and claimed equality with the Brahmans. The hostility which the Smiths have attracted is perhaps due to their collective social megalomania.

Occasionally we find castes which enjoyed political and economic power but were not rated high in ritual ranking. That is, there was a hiatus between their ritual and politico-economic positions. In such cases Sanskritization occurred sooner or later, because without it the claim to a higher position was not fully effective. The three main axes of power in the caste system are the ritual, the economic, and the political ones, and the possession of power in any one sphere usually leads to the acquisition of power in the other two. This does not mean, however, that inconsistencies do not occur—occasionally, a wealthy caste has a low ritual position, and contrariwise, a caste having a high ritual position is poor.

III

The idea of hierarchy is omnipresent in the caste system; not only do the various castes form a hierarchy, but the occupations practiced by them, the various items of their diet, and the customs they observe, all form separate hierarchies. Thus practicing an occupation like butchery, tanning, herding swine, or handling toddy, puts a caste in a low position. Eating pork or beef is more degrading than eating fish or mutton. Castes which offer blood-sacrifices to deities are lower than castes making only offerings of fruit and flowers. The entire way of life of the top castes seeps down the hierarchy. And as mentioned earlier, the language, cooking, clothing, jewelry, and way of life of the Brahmans spreads eventually to the entire society.

Two "legal fictions" seem to have helped the spread of Sanskritization among the low castes. Firstly, the ban against the non-twice-born castes performing Vedic ritual was circumvented by restricting the ban only to the chanting of mantras from the Vedas. That is, the ritual acts were separated from the accompanying mantras and this separation facilitated the spread of Brahmanic ritual

among all the castes of Hindus, frequently including Untouchables. Thus several Vedic rites, including the rite of the gift of the virgin (*kanyādān*), are performed at the marriage of many non-Brahmanical castes in Mysore State. And secondly, a Brahman priest officiates at these weddings. He does not chant Vedic mantras, however, but instead, the *maṅgalāṣṭaka stōtras* which are post-Vedic verses in Sanskrit. The substitution of these verses for Vedic mantras is the second "legal fiction."

IV

The non-Brahmanical castes adopt not only Brahmanical ritual, but also certain Brahmanical institutions and values. I shall illustrate what I mean by reference to marriage, women, and kinship. I should add here that throughout this essay I have drawn on my experience of conditions in Mysore State, except when I have stated otherwise.

Until recently, Brahmans used to marry their girls before puberty, and parents who had not succeeded in finding husbands for daughters past the age of puberty were regarded as guilty of a great sin. Brahman marriage is in theory indissoluble, and a Brahman widow, even if she be a child widow, is required to shave her head, shed all jewelry and ostentation in clothes. She was (and still is, to some extent) regarded as inauspicious. Sex life is denied her. Among Hindus generally, there is a preference for virginity in brides, chastity in wives, and continence in widows, and this is specially marked among the highest castes.

The institutions of the "low" castes are more liberal in the spheres of marriage and sex than those of the Brahmans. Post-puberty marriages do occur among them, widows do not have to shave their heads, and divorce and widow marriage are both permitted and practiced. In general, their sex code is not as harsh towards women as that of the top castes, especially Brahmans. But as a caste rises in the hierarchy and its ways become more Sanskritized, it adopts the sex and marriage code of the Brahmans. Sanskritization results in harshness towards women.

Sanskritization has significant effects on conjugal relations. Among Brahmans for instance, a wife is enjoined to treat her husband as a deity. It is very unusual for a wife to take her meal before the husband has his, and in orthodox families, the wife still eats on the dining leaf on which her husband has eaten. Normally, such a leaf may not be touched as it would render impure the hand touching it. Usually the woman who removes the dining leaf purifies the spot where the leaf had rested with a solution of cowdung, after which she washes her hands. There is no pollution, however, in eating on the leaf on which the husband has eaten.

Orthodox Brahman women perform a number of *vratas* or religious vows, the aim of some of which is to secure a long life for the husband. A woman's hope is to predecease her husband and thus avoid becoming a widow. Women who predecease their husbands are considered lucky as well as good, while widowhood is attributed to sins committed in a previous incarnation. A wife who shows utter devotion to her husband is held up as an ideal, as a *pativrata*, i.e., one who regards the devoted service of her husband as her greatest duty. There are myths

describing the devotion and loyalty of some sainted women to their husbands. These women are revered on certain occasions.

While polygyny is permitted, monogamy is held up as an ideal. Rāma, the hero of the epic Ramayana, is dedicated to the ideal of having only one wife (*ekapatnīvrata*). The conjugal state is regarded as a holy state, and the husband and wife must perform several rites together. A bachelor has a lower religious status than a married man, and is not allowed to perform certain important rites such as offering *piṇḍa* or balls of rice to the manes. Marriage is a religious duty. When bathing in a sacred river like the Ganges, the husband and wife have the ends of their garments tied together. A wife is entitled to half the religious merit earned by her husband by fasting, prayer, and penance.

In the sphere of kinship, Sanskritization stresses the importance of the *vaṃśa*, which is the patrilineal lineage of the Brahmins. The dead ancestors are apotheosized, and offerings of food and drink have to be made to them periodically by their male descendants. Absence of these offerings will confine the manes to a hell called *put*. The Sanskrit word for son is *putra*, which by folk etymology is considered to mean one who frees the manes from the hell called *put*.³ In short, Sanskritization results in increasing the importance of sons by making them a religious necessity. At the same time it has the effect of lowering the value of daughters because, as said earlier, parents are required to get them married before they come of age to a suitable man from the same subcaste. It is often difficult to find such a man, and in recent years, the difficulty has increased enormously owing to the institution of dowry.

Among the non-Brahmins of Mysore, however, though a son is preferred, a daughter is not unwelcome. Actually, girls are in demand among them. And there is no religious duty to get a girl married before puberty. The code under which a woman has to live is not as harsh among them as among the Brahmins. But the theory of the religious and moral unity of husband and wife is not as explicit among them. The non-Brahmins are also patrilineal, and the patrilineal lineage is well developed among them. The dead ancestors are occasionally offered food and drink. But it could be said that in the lineage of the non-Brahmins the religious element is less prominent than among the Brahmins.

V

Sanskritization means not only the adoption of new customs and habits, but also exposure to new ideas and values which have found frequent expression in the vast body of Sanskrit literature, sacred as well as secular. Karma, dharma, *pāpa*, *puṇya*, *māyā*, *saṃsāra* and *mokṣa* are examples of some of the most common Sanskritic theological ideas, and when a people become Sanskritized these words occur frequently in their talk. These ideas reach the common people through

³ See M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1899), p. 632: “*put* or *pud* (a word invented to explain *putra* or *put-tra*, see Mn. ix, 138, and cf. Nir. ii, 11) hell or a partic. hell (to which the childless are condemned)”; and “*putrá*, m. (etym. doubtful . . . traditionally said to be a comp. *put-tra* ‘preserving from the hell called Put,’ Mn. ix, 138) a son, child . . .”

Sanskritic myths and stories. The institution of *harikathā* helps in spreading Sanskrit stories and ideas among the illiterate. In a *harikathā* the priest reads and explains a religious story to his audience. Each story takes a few weeks to complete, the audience meeting for a few hours every evening in a temple. *Harikathās* may be held at any time, but festivals such as Dasara, Rāmanavamī, Shivarātri, and Ganesh Chaturthī are considered especially suitable for listening to *harikathās*. The faithful believe that such listening leads to the acquisition of spiritual merit. It is one of the traditionally approved ways of spending one's time.

The spread of Sanskrit theological ideas increased under British rule. The development of communications carried Sanskritization to areas previously inaccessible, and the spread of literacy carried it to groups very low in the caste hierarchy. Western technology—railways, the internal combustion engine, press, radio, and plane—has aided the spread of Sanskritization. For instance, the popularity of *harikathā* has increased in the last few years in Mysore City, the narrator usually using a microphone to reach a much larger audience than before. Indian films are popularizing stories and incidents borrowed from the epics and puranas. Films have been made about the lives of saints such as Nandanār, Pōtana, Tukārām, Chaitanya, Mīrā, and Tulasīdās. Cheap and popular editions in the various vernaculars of the epics, puranas, and other religious and semi-religious books are available nowadays.

The introduction by the British of a Western political institution like parliamentary democracy also contributed to the increased Sanskritization of the country. Prohibition, a Sanskritic value, has been written into the Constitution of the Republic of India, and the Congress Governments in various states have introduced it wholly or partly.

In some places like Mysore State, the local Congress party is busy conducting a campaign against offering blood-sacrifices to village deities. The Congress in the South is dominated by non-Brahmanical castes, the vast majority of which periodically sacrifice animals to their deities. In spite of this, the leaders of the Congress are advocating the substitution of offerings of fruit and flowers for animals. This is again a triumph for Sanskritic, though post-Vedic, values against the values of the bulk of the population.

So far, I have mentioned only the ways in which the westernization of India has helped its Sanskritization. In another sense, however, there is a conflict between Sanskritic and Western values. One aspect of the conflict which to my mind appears to be very important is the conflict, real or apparent, between the world view disclosed by the systematic application of scientific method to the various spheres of knowledge and the world view of the traditional religions.

No analysis of modern Indian social life would be complete without a consideration of westernization and the interaction between it and Sanskritization. In the nineteenth century, the British found in India institutions such as slavery, human sacrifice, suttee, thuggery, and in certain parts of the country, female infanticide. They used all the power at their disposal to fight these institutions which they considered to be barbarous. There were also many other institutions

which they did not approve of, but which, for various reasons, they did not try to abolish directly.

The fact that the country was overrun by aliens who looked down upon many features of the life of the natives, some of which they regarded as plainly barbarous, threw the leaders of the native society on the defensive. Reformist movements such as the *Brahmā Samāj* were aimed at ridding Hinduism of its numerous "evils."⁴ The present was so bleak that the past became golden. The *Ārya Samāj*, another reformist movement within Hinduism, emphasized a wish to return to Vedic Hinduism, which was unlike contemporary Hinduism. The discovery of Sanskrit by western scholars, and the systematic piecing together of India's past by western or Western-inspired scholarship, gave Indians a much-needed confidence in their relations with the West. Tributes to the greatness of ancient Indian culture by western scholars such as Max Müller were gratefully received by Indian leaders (see, for instance, appendices to Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*).⁵ It was not uncommon for educated Indians to make extravagant claims for their own culture, and to run down the West as materialistic and unspiritual.

The caste and class from which Indian leaders came were also relevant in this connection. The upper castes had a literary tradition and were opposed to blood-sacrifices, but in certain other customs and habits they were further removed from the British than the lower castes. The latter ate meat, some of them ate even pork and beef, and drank alcoholic liquor; women enjoyed greater freedom among them, and divorce and widow marriage were not prohibited. The Indian leaders were thus caught in a dilemma. They found that certain customs and habits which until then they had looked down upon obtained also among their masters. The British who ate beef and pork and drank liquor, possessed political and economic power, a new technology, scientific knowledge, and a great literature. Hence the westernized upper castes began acquiring customs and habits which were not dissimilar from those they had looked down upon. Another result was that the evils of upper caste Hindu society came to be regarded as evils of the entire society.

The form and pace of westernization of India, too, varied from one region to another, and from one section of the population to another. For instance, one group of people became westernized in their dress, diet, manners, speech, sports, and in the gadgets they used, while another absorbed Western science, knowledge, and literature while remaining relatively free from westernization in externals. It is clear that such a distinction cannot be a hard and fast one, but one of relative emphasis. It has to be made, however, in order to distinguish different types of westernization which obtained among the different groups in the country.

In Mysore State, for instance, the Brahmins led the other castes in westernization. This was only natural as the Brahmins possessed a literary tradition, and, in addition, a good many of them stood at the top of the rural economic hierarchy

⁴ See "Brahmā Samāj" in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, II, 813-814.

⁵ (Ahmedabad, 1946) See the Appendices which contain "testimonies by eminent men" to the greatness of Indian culture. Among the eminent men are Max Müller, J. Seymour Keay, M.P., Victor Cousin, Col. Thomas Munro, and the Abbé Dubois.

as landowners. (In a good many cases land had been given as a gift to Brahmans in return for their services as priest, or as an act of charity by a king.) They sensed the new opportunities which came into existence with the establishment of British rule over India, and left their natal villages for cities such as Bangalore and Mysore in order to have the benefit of English education, an indispensable passport to employment under the new dispensation.

Though the scholarly tradition of the Brahmans placed them in a favorable position for obtaining the new knowledge, in certain other matters they were the most handicapped in the race for westernization. This was especially so in the South where the large majority of them were vegetarians and abstained from alcoholic liquor. Also, the fear of being polluted prevented them from eating cooked food touched by others, and from taking up occupations considered defiling. To orthodox Brahmans the Englishman who ate pork and beef, drank whisky, and smoked a pipe, was the living embodiment of ritual impurity. On the other hand, the Englishman had political and economic power, for which he was feared, admired, respected, and disliked.

The net result of the westernization of the Brahmans was that they interposed themselves between the British and the rest of the native population. The result was a new and secular caste system superimposed on the traditional system, in which the British, the New Kshatriyas, stood at the top, while the Brahmans occupied the second position, and the others stood at the base of the pyramid. The Brahmans looked up to the British, and the rest of the people looked up to both the Brahmans and the British. The fact that some of the values and customs of the British were opposed to some Brahmanical values made the situation confusing. However, such a contradiction was always implicit, though not in such a pronounced manner, in the caste system. Kshatriya and Brahmanical values have always been opposed to some extent, and in spite of the theoretical superiority of the Brahman to all the other castes, the Kshatriya, by virtue of the political (and through it the economic) power at his disposal, has throughout exercised a dominant position. The super-imposition of the British on the caste system only sharpened the contrast.

The position of the Brahman in the new hierarchy was crucial. He became the filter through which westernization reached the rest of Hindu society in Mysore. This probably helped westernization as the other castes were used to imitating the ways of the Brahmans. But while the westernization of the Brahmans enabled the entire Hindu society to westernize, the Brahmans themselves found some aspects of westernization, such as the British diet, dress, and freedom from pollution, difficult to accept. (Perhaps another caste would not have found them so difficult. The Coorgs, for instance, took quite easily to British diet and dress, and certain activities like dancing, hunting, and sports.)

The Brahmans of Mysore are divided into *vaidikas* or priests, and *laukikas* or the laity, and a similar distinction seems to obtain among the Brahmans in other parts of India. It is only the *vaidikas* who follow the priestly vocation while the *laukikas* follow other and secular occupations. Ritually, the priests are higher than the laity, but the fact that the latter frequently enjoyed economic and political power gave them a superior position in secular contexts. British rule

widened further the gulf between the two, for it provided the laity with numerous opportunities to acquire wealth and power. And one of the long-term effects of British rule was to increase the secularization of Indian life. The secularization as well as the widening of the economic horizon pushed the priests into a lower position than before. Also traditional Sanskrit learning did not have either the prestige, or yield the dividends, which Western education did. The priests began by being aggressive towards the westernized laity, but gradually, as the numbers of the latter increased, they were thrown more and more on the defensive. Worse was to follow when the priests themselves started becoming westernized. They wanted electric lights, radios, and taps in their houses. They began riding cycles. The leather seat of the cycle was considered defiling, and so it was at first covered with the pure and sacred deerskin. In course of time the deerskin was discarded and the "naked" leather seat was used. Tap water was objected to at first as the water had to pass through a leather washer, but in time even this objection was set aside. Finally, the priests started sending their sons to Western-type schools, and this frequently meant that there was none in the family to continue the father's occupation.

There is, however, another tendency in modern India which is buttressing the position and authority of the priests. Educated and westernized Indians are showing some interest in Sanskrit and in ancient Indian culture, and in the country at large, politicians are frequently heard stressing the importance of Sanskritic learning. Pandit Nehru's *Discovery of India* has started many a young man on a similar journey into the country's past. Also, many Westerners have suddenly begun discovering new virtues in India, Indians, and Indian culture, and this has resulted in more Indians wanting to seek a better acquaintance with their culture.

The westernization of the Brahmans of Mysore brought about a number of changes in their life. I will mention only a few here. There was a change in their appearance and dress. The tuft gave way to cropped hair and the traditional dress gave place at least partially, to western-type dress and shoes. The change in dress marked a gradual weakening of ideas regarding ritual purity. For instance, formerly eating was a ritual act, and a Brahman had to wear ritually pure robes while eating or serving a meal. This meant wearing either a freshly washed cotton dhoti, or a silk dhoti, and a pure upper cloth. Wearing a shirt was taboo. But as Western clothes became more popular Brahman men sat to dinner with their shirts on. And today dining at a table is becoming common among the rich.

Formerly, the morning meal was offered to the domestic deity before being served to the members of the family, and all the male members who had donned the sacred thread performed a few ritual acts before beginning the meal. Nowadays, however, many Brahmans have discarded the sacred thread, though the *upanayana* ceremony at which the thread is donned still continues to be performed. And it is only at formal dinners where the orthodox are present that certain ritual acts are performed before eating. Where people eat at a table, purification with a solution of cowdung is no longer done.

The Brahman dietary has been enlarged to include certain vegetables which

were formerly forbidden such as onion, potato, carrot, radish, and beetroot. Many eat raw eggs for health reasons and consume medicines which they know to be made from various organs of animals. But meat eating is even now rare, while the consumption of western alcoholic liquor is not as rare. Cigarettes are common among the educated.

The Brahmans have also taken to new occupations. Even in the thirties, the Brahmans showed a reluctance to take up a trade or any occupation involving manual work. But they were driven by the prevalent economic depression to take up new jobs, and World War II completed this process. Many Brahmans enlisted in the Army and this effected a great change in their habits and outlook. Before World War II, young men who wanted to go to Bombay, Calcutta, or Delhi in search of jobs had to be prepared for the opposition of their elders. But the postwar years found young men not only in all parts of India, but outside too. There was a sudden expansion in the geographical and social space of the Brahmans. Formerly the Brahmans objected to becoming doctors as the profession involved handling men from all castes, including Untouchables, and corpses. This is now a thing of the past. A few educated Brahmans now own farms where they raise poultry. One of them even wants to have a piggery.

Over seventy years ago, the institution of bride-price seems to have prevailed among some sections of Mysore Brahmans. But with westernization, and the demand it created for educated boys who had good jobs, dowry became popular. The better educated a boy, the larger the dowry his parents demanded for him. The age at which girls married shot up. Over twenty-five years ago it was customary for Brahmans to marry their girls before puberty. Nowadays, urban and middle class Brahmans are rarely able to get their girls married before they are eighteen, and there are many girls above twenty who are unmarried. Child widows are rare, and shaving the heads of widows is practically a thing of the past.

There has been a general secularization of Hindu life in the last one hundred and fifty years, and this has especially affected the Brahmans whose life was permeated with ritual. The life of no other caste among Hindus was equally ritualized. One of the many interesting contradictions of modern Hindu social life is that while the Brahmans are becoming more and more westernized, the other castes are becoming more and more Sanskritized. In the lower reaches of the hierarchy, castes are taking up customs which the Brahmans are busy discarding. As far as these castes are concerned, it looks as though Sanskritization is an essential preliminary to westernization.

To describe the social changes occurring in modern India in terms of Sanskritization and westernization is to describe it primarily in cultural and not structural terms. An analysis in terms of structure is much more difficult than an analysis in terms of culture. The increase in the social space of the Brahmans, and its implications for them and for the caste system as a whole, needs to be studied in detail. The consequences of the existence of the dual, and occasionally conflicting, pressures of Sanskritization and westernization provide an interesting field for systematic sociological analysis.

A Note to the Above⁶

The British conquest of India set free a number of forces, political, economic, social, and technological. These forces affected this country's social and cultural life profoundly and at every point. The withdrawal of the British from India not only did not mean the cessation of these forces, but, meant, on the contrary, their intensification. For instance, the economic revolution which the British began with the gradual introduction of a new technology under a capitalist and laissez-faire ideology has given place to a vast and planned effort to develop the country as quickly as possible under a socialist and democratic ideology. The idea of Five-Year Plans may be described as the culmination of the slow and unplanned attempts of the British to transform the country industrially and economically. The political integration which the British began is also being carried further, though here the division of the country into the two states of India and Pakistan is a step away from the integration of the sub-continent. But this does not mean that forces inherent in Indian society have been destroyed by the British impact; they have only undergone modification and, in some cases, have been even strengthened. Pre-British economy was a stationary one in which money was relatively scarce, and barter obtained extensively in the rural areas. Relations between individuals were unspecialized, multiplex, and largely determined by status. The British gradually brought in a growing and monetary economy, participation in which was not banned to any group or individual on the ground of birth in a particular caste. For instance, the abolition of slavery by the British enabled the Untouchable castes in Coorg to desert their Coorg masters and to work as laborers on the coffee plantations started by Europeans.⁷ But for the emancipating legislation they could not have participated in the new economy. This should serve to remind us that British rule also brought in a new set of values and world view.

I have elsewhere tried to argue⁸ that the traditional and pre-British caste system permitted a certain amount of group mobility. Only the extremities of the system were relatively fixed while there was movement in between. This was made possible by a certain vagueness regarding mutual rank which obtained in the middle regions of the caste hierarchy. Vagueness as to mutual rank is of the essence in the caste system in operation as distinct from the system in popular conception.⁹ And mobility increased a great deal after the advent of the British.

⁶ It is nearly a year since the preceding essay was written, and in the meantime I have given some more thought to the subject. The result is the present Note in which I have made a few additional observations on the twin processes of Sanskritization and westernization. In this connection I must thank Dr. F. G. Bailey of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, for taking the trouble to criticize my paper in detail in his letters to me. I must also thank Dr. McKim Marriott of the University of California, and the delegates of the Conference of Anthropologists and Sociologists held at Madras on Oct. 5-7, 1955, for criticisms which followed the reading of the paper.

⁷ See *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, p. 19.

⁸ See my essay, "Varna and Caste," in *A. R. Wadia: Essays in Philosophy Presented in his Honour* (Bangalore, 1954).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

Groups which in the pre-British days had had no chance of aspiring to anything more than a bare subsistence came by opportunities for making money, and having made money, they wanted to stake a claim for higher status. Some of them did achieve higher status. The social circulation which was sluggish in pre-British times speeded up considerably in the British period. But the change was only a quantitative one.

Economic betterment thus seems to lead to the Sanskritization of the customs and way of life of a group. Sometimes a group may start by acquiring political power and this may lead to economic betterment and Sanskritization. This does not mean, however, that economic betterment must necessarily lead to Sanskritization. What is important is the collective desire to rise high in the esteem of friends and neighbors, and this should be followed by the adoption of the methods by which the status of a group is raised. It is a fact that such a desire is usually preceded by the acquisition of wealth; I am unable, however, to assert that economic betterment is a necessary precondition to Sanskritization. For instance, the Untouchables of Rampura village in Mysore State are getting increasingly Sanskritized and this seems to be due to their present leadership and to the fact that the younger men are more in contact with the outside world than their parents. Also, if the reports which one hears from some local men are to be believed, Rampura Untouchables are being egged on by Untouchable leaders from outside to change their way of life. Whether the economic position of Untouchables has improved during the last seventy years or so is not easy to determine, though it is likely that they also have benefited from the greater prosperity which resulted when the area under irrigation increased nearly eighty years ago. In brief, while we have no evidence to assert that all cases of Sanskritization are preceded by the acquisition of wealth, the available evidence is not definite enough to state that Sanskritization can occur without any reference whatever to the economic betterment of a group. Economic betterment, the acquisition of political power, education, leadership, and a desire to move up in the hierarchy, are all relevant factors in Sanskritization, and each case of Sanskritization may show all or some of these factors mixed up in different measures.

It is necessary, however, to stress that Sanskritization does not automatically result in the achievement of a higher status for the group. The group concerned must clearly put forward a claim to belong to a particular varna, Vaishya, Kshatriya, or Brahman. They must alter their customs, diet, and way of life suitably, and if there are any inconsistencies in their claim, they must try to "explain" them by inventing an appropriate myth. In addition, the group must be content to wait an indefinite period, and during this period it must maintain a continuous pressure regarding its claims. A generation or two must pass usually before a claim begins to be accepted; this is due to the fact that the people who first hear the claim know that the caste in question is trying to pass for something other than what it really is, and the claim has a better chance with their children and grandchildren. In certain cases, a caste or tribal group may make a claim for a long time without it being accepted. I have in view only acceptance by

other castes and I am not considering individual sceptics who will always be present.

It is even possible that a caste may overreach in its claims, with the result that instead of moving up it may incur the disapproval of the others. This has probably happened with the Smiths of South India though nothing definite can be said about them except after a thorough study of their history. It is also not unlikely that a claim which may succeed in a particular area or period of time will not succeed in another. A developed historical sense would be inimical to such claims but it is as yet not forthcoming among our people.

Group mobility is a characteristic of the caste system, whereas in a class system it is the individual and his family which moves up or down. One of the implications of group mobility is that either the group is large enough to constitute an endogamous unit by itself, or it recruits girls in marriage from the original group while it does not give girls in return. This implies that the original group is impressed with the fact that the splinter group is superior to it for otherwise it would not consent to such a one-sided and inferior role. A larger number of people are needed in North India than in the South to constitute an endogamous group, for marriage with near kin is prohibited in the North, and there is in addition an insistence on village exogamy. In the South, on the other hand, cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriages are preferred, and the village is not an exogamous unit. But I am straying from my main theme; what I wish to stress here is that Sanskritization is a source of fission in the caste system, and does occasionally bring about hypergamous relations between the splinter group and the original caste from which it has fissioned off. It both precedes as well as sets the seal on social mobility. It thereby brings the caste system of any region closer to the existing politico-economic situation. But for it the caste system would have been subjected to great strain. It has provided a traditional medium of expression for change within that system, and the medium has held good in spite of the vast increase in the quantum of change which has occurred in British and post-British India. It has canalized the change in such a way that all-Indian values are asserted and the homogeneity of the entire Hindu society increases. The continued Sanskritization of castes will probably mean the eventual introduction of major cultural and structural changes in Hindu society as a whole. But Sanskritization does not always result in higher status for the Sanskritized caste, and this is clearly exemplified by the Untouchables. However thoroughgoing the Sanskritization of an Untouchable group may be, it is unable to cross the barrier of untouchability. It is indeed an anachronism that while groups which were originally outside Hinduism such as tribal groups or alien ethnic groups have succeeded in entering the Hindu fold, and occasionally at a high level, an Untouchable caste is always forced to remain untouchable. Their only chance of moving up is to go so far away from their natal village that nothing is known about them in the new area. But spatial mobility was very difficult in pre-British India; it meant losing such security as they had and probably going into an enemy chieftom and facing all the dangers there. Movement was near

impossible when we remember that Untouchables were generally attached as agrestic serfs to caste Hindu landlords.¹⁰

The fact that Sanskritization does not help the Untouchables to move up does not, however, make Sanskritization any the less popular. All over India there are discernible movements more or less strong, among Untouchables, to discard the consumption of carcass beef, domestic pork, and toddy, and to adopt Sanskritic customs, beliefs, and deities. It is very likely that in the next twenty or thirty years the culture of Untouchables all over the country will have undergone profound changes. Some of them may become even more Sanskritized than many Shūdra castes. The Constitution has abolished untouchability and practical steps are being taken to implement the legal abolition. One naturally wonders what position Untouchables will have in the Hindu society of the future.

I have been asked by more than one student of Indian anthropology whether I regard Sanskritization as only a one-way process, and whether the local culture is always a recipient. The answer is clear: it is a two-way process though the local cultures seem to have received more than they have given. In this connection, it should be remembered that throughout Indian history local elements have entered into the main body of Sanskritic belief, myth, and custom, and in their travel throughout the length and breadth of India, elements of Sanskritic culture have undergone different changes in the different culture areas. Festivals such as the Dasara, Deepavali, and Holi have no doubt certain common features all over the country, but they have also important regional peculiarities. In the case of some festivals only the name is common all over India and everything else is different—the same name connotes different things to people in different regions. Similarly each region has its own body of folklore about the heroes of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and not infrequently, epic incidents and characters are related to outstanding features of local geography. And in every part of India are to be found Brahmans who worship the local deities which preside over epidemics, cattle, children's lives, and crops, besides the great gods of all-India Hinduism. It is not unknown for a Brahman to make a blood-sacrifice to one of these deities through the medium of non-Brahman friend. Throughout Indian history Sanskritic Hinduism has absorbed local and folk elements and their presence makes easier the further absorption of similar elements. The absorption is done in such a way that there is a continuity between the folk and the theological or philosophical levels, and this makes possible both the gradual transformation of the folk layer as well as the "vulgarization" of the theological layer.

In the foregoing essay I have stated that it looks as though for the non-Brahman castes of Mysore, Sanskritization is an essential preliminary to westernization. I wish to stress here that this is a matter of empirical observation only,

¹⁰ Dr. Adrian Mayer, however, states that the Balais (Untouchables) in the Mālwa village which he is studying are trying to move into the Shūdra *varṇa*. It would be interesting to see if they succeed in their efforts. I thank Dr. Mayer for allowing me to read his unpublished paper "Caste and Hierarchy."

and does not refer to any logical necessity for Sanskritization occurring prior to westernization. It is possible that westernization may occur without an intermediary process of Sanskritization. This may happen to groups and individuals living in the cities as well as to rural and tribal folk; it is especially likely to happen under the swift industrialization contemplated by the Five-Year Plans. Increasing westernization will also mean the greater secularization of the outlook of the people and this, together with the movement towards a "classless and casteless society" which is the professed aim of the present government, might mean the disappearance of Hinduism altogether. To the question of whether the threat to religion from westernization is not common to all countries in the world and not something peculiar to Hinduism, the answer is that Christianity and Islam are probably better equipped to withstand westernization because they have a strong organization whereas Hinduism lacks all organization, excluding the caste system. If and when caste disappears, Hinduism will also disappear, and it is hardly necessary to point out that the present climate of influential opinion in the country is extremely hostile to caste. Even those who are extremely skeptical of the effectiveness of the measures advocated to do away with caste consider industrialization and urbanization to be effective solvents of caste in the long run. The question is how long is the run going to be? A warning must however be uttered against the facile assumption that caste is going to melt like butter before westernization. The student of caste is impressed with its great strength and resilience, and its capacity to adjust itself to new circumstances. It is salutary to remember that during the last hundred years or more, caste became stronger in some respects. Westernization has also in some ways favored Sanskritization. The assumption of a simple and direct opposition between the two and of the ultimate triumph of westernization, I find too simple a hypothesis, considering the strength of caste as an institution and the great complexity of the processes involved.

It is necessary to underline the fact that Sanskritization is an extremely complex and heterogeneous concept. It is even possible that it would be more profitable to treat it as a bundle of concepts than as a single concept. The important thing to remember is that it is only a name for a widespread social and cultural process, and our main task is to understand the nature of these processes. The moment it is discovered that the term is more a hindrance than a help in analysis, it should be discarded quickly and without regret.

Apropos of the heterogeneity of the concept of Sanskritization, it may be remarked that it subsumes several mutually antagonistic values, perhaps even as westernization does. The concept of varna, for instance, subsumes values which are ideally complementary but, as a matter of actual and historical fact, have been competitive if not conflicting. In this connection it is necessary to add that the grading of the four varnas which is found in the famous *Purushasūkta* verse and subsequent writings, probably does not reflect the social order as it existed everywhere and at all times. Historians of caste have recorded a conflict between Brahmans and Kshatriyas during Vedic times, and Professor G. S.

Ghurye has postulated that the Jain and Buddhist movements were in part a revolt of the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas against the supremacy of the Brahmins.¹¹

Today we find different castes dominating in different parts of India, and frequently, in one and the same region, more than one caste dominates. In Coorg, for instance, Coorgs, Lingayats, and Brahmins all dominate. The Coorgs are the landed aristocracy and they have certain martial institutions and qualities, and a good many low castes have tried to imitate them. But the Coorgs themselves have imitated the Lingayats and Brahmins. The Brahmins have not wielded political power, and it could be said that some of the qualities traditionally associated with that caste are not respected by the Coorgs, to say the least. Still they have exercised a hold over the Coorgs, as the writings of European missionaries testify. The imitation of the Lingayats by the Coorgs was facilitated by the fact that Coorg was ruled by Lingayat Rajas for nearly two centuries.

But I am digressing; what I wish to emphasize is that in the study of Sanskritization it is important to know the kind of caste which dominates in a particular region. If they are Brahmins, or a caste like the Lingayats, then Sanskritization will probably be quicker and Brahmanical values will spread, whereas if the dominating caste is a local Kshatriya or Vaishya caste, Sanskritization will be slower, and the values will not be Brahmanical. The non-Brahmanical castes are generally less Sanskritized than the Brahmins, and where they dominate, non-Sanskritic customs may get circulated among the people. It is not inconceivable that occasionally they may even mean the de-Sanskritization of the imitating castes.

One way of breaking down Sanskritization into simpler and more homogeneous concepts would be to write a history of Sanskritic culture taking care to point out the different value-systems subsumed in it and to delineate the regional variations. The task would be a stupendous one even if the period beginning with the British rule was excluded. Such a study is not likely to be forthcoming in the near future and anthropologists would be well advised to continue studying Sanskritization as they are doing at present: study each field-instance of Sanskritization in relation to the locally dominant caste and other factors. The next task would be to compare different instances of Sanskritization in the same culture-area, and the third task would be to extend the scope of comparative studies to include the whole of India. Such an approach might also enable us to translate historical problems into spatial problems. It will not, however, satisfy perfectionists, but perfectionism is often a camouflage for sterility.

¹¹ See *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay, 1952), p. 65.