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Chapter Three

Social Organization and Everyday Norms: Religious Ideas and Values

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INTRODUCTION

Pre-colonial Indian society was socially and culturally organized within diverse socio-culturally stratified kinship and clan groups (*jāti*), generally translated as the Indian caste system. The Indian caste system is a most ancient, complex and controversial topic in Indian religious history, anthropology, sociology and South Asia Area studies. As a constant historical (and contemporary) social reality, it remains a continuous challenge to western classification and understanding. The Indian caste system is not confined to Hindu groups only, but it is a social reality in Indian Sikh, Muslim and Christian communities, where the caste system has been absorbed within local caste hierarchies. Indian Hindu groups will be however the main concern of this chapter.

Despite the fact that modern South-Asian scholarship is divided about the complex subject of caste (see Raheja 1988; Quigley 1983; 2003: 495-508; Marriott 1976; Moffatt 1979; Natrajan 2005; Parry 1986; Reddy 2005), Louis Dumont's (1986/1966) fundamental studies on the nature of castes and their classification continue to remain

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central to historical and socio-anthropological analysis of Indian social structure, its ideas and values.

Caste is a foreign term derived from Portuguese term *casta* (from *casto*: pure, chaste or “that which should not be mixed” (Dumont 1986: 36). It thus can be associated with lineage or ethnic group. Caste, as an etic category from outside, from the perspective of the observer, denotes a cultural translation of an indigenous, local socio-religious classificatory system based on ideas and values (the ideology) of hierarchy into western or European thinking. Hierarchy in Dumont’s understanding expresses itself as a social differentiation, separation and division of labour and is religiously justified by “opposing pure and impure” on an ideological level of cultural ideas of hierarchical gastro-cosmic purity and pollution (see Appadurai 1981; Barnett et al 1976; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1974; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi/ Fuller 1980; Fuller, 1979; Khare, 2003; Kolenda 1991). Caste can thus be conceived of as a unit of social structure, interaction, marriage, and commensality within a hierarchical social system entangled ideologically with the idea of the hierarchy of the cosmos.

The nineteenth-century Hindu social reality of differentiation and stratification corresponds to the emic indigenous term *jāti*, which denotes caste as a social group whose members eat with one another, practice endogamy through marrying within their own group, and have the same occupation or profession. *Jāti* unfolds the micro-empirical level of small-scale, local societies and social groups. *Jāti* also relates simultaneously to the mythological *varna* category evoking in Sanskrit the associations of colour, description, selection, and classification. *Varna* recalls, according to T.N. Madan, “an ancient fourfold arrangement of socioeconomic categories (...), which is traced back to an

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oral tradition preserved in the Rigveda (dating perhaps from between 1500 and 1200 bce)” (Madan 2019).

Varṇa and *jāti* interlink finally with the category of *dharma* (Sanskrit: order), the level of religious differentiation - a holy order and hierarchy of the cosmos. Dharma is a socio-religious concept in South Asian ethics. This extremely polysemous concept is subject to constant changes of meaning but can be roughly translated as religion, socio-religious law, a socio-moralistic order and duty, but also as a legitimate rule, kingship. *Varṇa*, *dharma* and *jāti* are thus interrelated through myth, ritual, and social obligations. Caste, in the common use denotes both a socially obligatory social structure based on rituals, and its socio-ritual obligations related to the local, regional, and mythological social and cosmic order. Caste, according to T.N. Madan, “is generally believed to be an ancient, abiding, and unique Indian institution upheld by a complex cultural ideology” (ibid).

THE EMERGENCE OF ‘HINDUISM’

The caste-system became synonymous with the religion of Hindus and Hinduism in the 19th century. The complexity of these categorizations, however, is evident in the etymology of the terms Hinduism and Hindu. The term Hinduism derives from “Hindu” (Stietencron 1991:11), the Persian variant of the Sanskrit term *sindhu*, which is the name for the River Indus, primarily a geographic term. In its plural form, it denotes the population living on the shores of Indus, the Indians. This usage is attested to in Persian writings from the year 517 B.C.E. For more than 1000 years, the geographical category

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“Hindu” in its plural form was used to indicate Indians in general. The year 712 C.E., when Muslims settled in the Indus valley and began their first proselytization, witnessed the beginnings of religious differentiation between Indians who were called “Hindus” and Muslims.

Twelfth-century authors of medieval Europe imagined a distant India with its own thriving Christian community next to the strong Muslim and Persian rule. It was in this sense that European seafarers, among them Vasco de Gama (ca. 1460-1524 CE), searched, not only for spices, but also for Christian communities. Syrian-Christian communities were indeed discovered after Vasco de Gama’s landing on the Malabar Coast in 1498, i.e., on India’s West Coast. However, most of the population was regarded as “heathen” and designated by the Latin term *gentio* and its anglicized form *gentoo*. In the 18th century, the word “Gentoo” was replaced by the word “Hindoo.” A “Hindoo” was someone who was other than a Christian, Jew, Muslim or Parsi.

Just as by the 19th century “Hindu” had become a common term denoting the follower of a religion, so too the term “Hinduism” came to be more widely used to indicate the living religion of the Hindus (Stientencron 1991:13). This *religious* classification of the concept hints at the notion of “Hinduism” as the religion of the majority of the population – an idea that had not previously existed in Indian cultures (ibid:12). “Hinduism” in the first instance was thus an etic, external, concept, dealing with cultural otherness. The term “Hinduism” then became for “Orientalists”, scholars who dealt with the Far East, a catch-all term for various local religious traditions. “Hinduism” was contrasted with the idea of the “Vedic religion,” which was investigated with great enthusiasm by Indologists as something purer, more “other,” i.e., a religion without

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“superstition.” The timespan between the religion of the Vedas (14th century BCE.) and the living Hinduism of the 19th century CE was regarded by Orientalist scholars as the heyday of Brahmanism. This was the religion of the priests or Brahmin caste that was based on literary sources, the Brahmanas [treatises describing *inter alia* the sacrificial rituals] the Upanishads [secret teachings, Vedic tracts dealing with broad philosophical issues], the *sūtras* [collections of precepts], and the *smṛti* [sacred tradition handed down from memory] (see *ibid*: 13).

New interpretations of the Indian traditions formulated by numerous nineteenth-century Hindu reformers contributed to the ideological transformation and construction of Hinduism: a new, universal, “more puritanized” Hinduism emerged as more receptive to Christian or Western criticism. Its pioneer was the Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894), who himself was a representative of the neo-Hinduist school of thought. Neo-Hinduism of the 19th century and early 20th century created its own definition of Hinduism in which the Neo-Hinduistic reformers placed a particularly high value on harking back to the Vedic traditions (see Beckerlegge 2004; Bharati Agehananda 1970; Gupta 2004; Scaligero 1950; Nanda 2001; Spencer 1989/1981; Williams 1989/1981).

Proponents of what has been labelled ‘Neo-Hinduism’ have typically been identified with new interpretations of Vedic literature, advocacy of a universalist interpretation of Hindu philosophy, thus transgressing the social norms of caste, and vigorous missionary activity both inside and outside India. Neo-Hinduism’s relationship with earlier tradition suggests breaks. In contrast to “traditional” Hinduism, expressions of ‘Neo-Hinduism’ have not placed the same emphasis on orthopraxy (the properly

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performed cult). Traditional guiding concepts were reinterpreted in the light of the encounter with the West. Through harking back to the written and orally transmitted literature (Vedas), fundamental insights were (re) discovered, which had played little or no part in “traditional” Hinduism. European criticism led some to reject the hierarchy of castes as a central socio-religious law (Halbfass 1981:245). Neo-Hinduism, according to Paul Hacker, can be regarded as “Hinduist modernism.” (Hacker as cited by Halbfass 1981:246).

Wilhelm Halbfass (1981: 245), referring to Paul Hacker, has contrasted Neo-Hinduism as the “surviving form of traditional Hinduism” with “traditionalism”. Neo-Hinduism differs from “traditional Hinduism” in that, while Neo-Hinduism has become known outside India, Hindu traditionalism within the framework of the representatives of *sanātana dharma* (eternal *dharma*) is mainly known in India itself. The *sanātana dharma* movement uses no primarily Western examples in its religious reinterpretation, whereas Neo-Hinduism is starkly oriented on Western examples in its reinterpretations. Neither grouping necessarily excludes the other; indeed, they often overlap.

At the very end of the 19th century, Vedanta Societies were influential in promoting the global and universal appeal of Neo-Hinduism (see Beckerlegge 2004: 296-320). Two iconic Hindu reformers were synonymous with the Vedanta Societies and responsible for their organization: Sri Ramakrishna (c.1836 – 1886) and Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902). Both became “global gurus” in the sense that they attracted Hindus and those not born into Hinduism. One of their most famous international followers was the Irish-born Sister Nivedita. The social worker, author, and teacher became a disciple of Swami Vivekananda whom she met 1895 in London and then

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travelled to Calcutta in 1898. Swami Vivekananda gave her the name Nivedita (meaning "Dedicated to God") when he initiated her into the vow of *brahmacarya* (lifelong celibacy) in 1898. On 18 March 1898, Swami Vivekananda organized a public meeting at Star Theatre to introduce Sister Nivedita to the people of Calcutta. There she expressed her desire to serve India and its people. Some of her publications give insight into her spiritual revelations as a Hindu woman: *Kali the Mother* (1899); *The Master as I Saw Him* (1906) and *The Web Of Indian Life* (1904).

Beckerlegge (2004:297) argues that Vivekananda's teaching led to the emergence of the phenomenon of "imported localism" and the phenomenon of globalization and localization processes, spread by the Ramakrishna Mission, which was established in 1897. Through the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, reformed Hinduism presented itself to the world as a universal religion and the "mother of religions", promoting the local Math and Mission as a "global" movement. Ramakrishna is honored today in 147 Ramakrishna Math and Mission centers around the world. Vivekananda is seen by Brekke (Brekke 1999; 2002:46) and Beckerlegge (2004) as the "first Hindu missionary" in the West who became the precursor of the global Hinduism of the 1960s and of the "Go East" journey of the hippy movement of the 1960s.

Another iconic neo-Hindu tradition and transnational spiritual union is that of Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and the Mother, born Mirra Alfassa (1878–1973). In 1920 Mirra Alfassa followed Sri Aurobindo from France to practice Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga tradition in the French settlement Pondicherry. Later in 1926 the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was founded by Sri Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa, revered by Sri Aurobindo as the Mother (see Heehs 2015). Eventually, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga tradition proved to sustain

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an anti-colonial empowerment and spiritual response to British colonization and materialistic worldview (Aurobindo 1990). To this day, the utopian and spiritual community of Auroville continues to offer an alternative model of life to Indian and international followers.

The nineteenth-century religious Hindu renaissance and awakening is also strongly connected with female emancipation and empowerment. This is evident in an emerging Indian feminist movement and characterized by charismatic public personalities of female writers (see Tharu/Lalita 1993), feminist activists like Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) (see Kosambi 1988), Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910) (see O’Hanlon 1994), and political poet Sarojini Naidu (1879 –1949) (see Naravane 1980).

When analyzing neo-Hinduism of the 19th century, its relation to nationalism needs to be addressed. Dayananda Sarasvati, the founder of the militant socio-religious Arya Samaj movement (see Zavos 1999), has introduced to religious revivalism a whole new dimension: the politicization of the religious Hindu identity that has increasingly led to a Hindu nationalism (see van der Veer 1996). The awakening of nationalism at the end of the 19th century led to a polarization of the religious-national identities of Hindus and Muslims. The emerging communalism – demands for national independence that drew on religious identity for their legitimation – reached its highpoint in 1947 as the partition of the newly independent subcontinent produced two new nations: the Indian Union and Pakistan (see Ram-Prasad 2003; Shani 2005; Sundar 2004; Thapar 1989). The reform-oriented religious and political-religious articulations at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries thus turned out to be phases in the process of building national identities.

MAHIMA DHARMA – A LOCAL REFORM MOVEMENT

Besides the emancipatory, universalizing, and global appeal of nineteenth-century century Hindu reformers, thinkers, and activists, very local religious movements also emerged at that time in India. Mahima Dharma is an example of this dynamic. Mahima Dharma, literally “the glorious dharma”, emerged at the end of the 19th century as a Hindu reform movement and new religion that comprises both a monastic order and a lay community. Its main characteristics are asceticism, vegetarianism, and a rejection of the caste system.

Mahima Dharma’s doctrines are traceable to the founder of the religion, Mahima Gosvami, who lived at the beginning of the 19th century. His origin is unknown, but his devotees consider Mahima Gosvami to have been a great ascetic who lived in the jungles of the Himalaya, spreading his teaching of God, Mahima Alekha, to the plains of Odisha (formerly Orissa) in eastern India through asceticism, vegetarianism, and the rejection of the caste system. His devotees believe that Mahima Goswami considered himself the incarnation of Mahima Alekh. Mahima Dharmis worship Mahima Alekh as the highest, unwritten (a-lekha), indescribable God. Alekh is conceived to be *śūnya* – the void – all and nothing. The Sanskrit term a-lekha has a twofold meaning: it means ‘not to write/ unwritten’, “not written,” “script-less” [lacking a script(ure)], even “alphabetic”] “indescribable” and ‘without writing’. Mahima God can only be approached by meditation, an ascetic lifestyle, and particular ritual practices. These ritual practices mainly consist of fire rituals performed only by ascetics, and individual prayers practiced by ascetics as well as by lay devotees (*bhaktas*).

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The monastic Mahima Dharma community has been represented by two brotherhoods, the Balkaladhari-s and the Kaupinadhari-s. The Balkaladhari-s are found mostly in Central Odisha whereas the Kaupinadhari-s, by contrast, are primarily in the northern and western parts of the state. The lay members (*bhaktas*) of Mahima Dharma are primarily spread throughout the rural areas and populations of Odisha among the so-called lower castes (Scheduled Castes) and the indigenous population, the Scheduled Tribes (ST). These classifications were introduced in 1947 by the Indian government in an attempt to encompass the great diversity of Indian populations in clearly defined categories that do not always correspond to actual social conditions.

For the ascetics, the teachings of Mahima Dharma constitute an independent religion. The female and male lay followers of Mahima Dharma, however, view themselves as belonging more to a school or “sect” (*sampradāya*) of “Hindu Dharma” (Hinduism). Lay followers in the rural tribal areas call the new religion *alekh dharma*, which is primarily embodied by its male and female ascetic and ecstatic followers.

The monastic brotherhoods are organized in a network of local centers whose coordinating office is located in the holy city of Joranda in Dhenkanal (Central Orissa). The Kaupinadhari-s wear a loincloth made of *gerua*-dyed cotton that is drawn between their legs and held up by a woven belt. The Balkaladhari-s, also called Kumbhipata, wear the same form of loincloth except that it is typically made of the bark of the Kumbhi tree, a local tree symbolizing the nakedness of the ascetic and meditation in the jungle as indications of a strict ascetic practice. A further recognizable characteristic of the ascetics is their use of large umbrellas made from palm leaves to protect them against sun and

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rain during long journeys. The umbrellas also relate symbolically to the local royal powers of little kingdoms in Odisha.

The Odishan material of Mahima Dharma illustrates some general structures of religious transformation starting in the 19th century in rural and indigenous contexts of India: dynamics of institutionalization of local religion blending new and traditional concepts in a local manner. In this vein, my research on Mahima Dharma ascetics (Guzy 2002 and 2005) revealed that the local concept of the power of the local village and tribal goddesses (Devi) transformed to the power of the disciplined and thus sacred bodies of ascetics. Simultaneously, indigenous, vernacular female spirituality and female ritual practices of the Goddess continued unchanged even as a new monastic theology of a male God Alekha tried to compete with the local, female ritual authorities. Mahima Dharma reflects on a very local level the cultural and religious changes brought in by the spread of socio-critical ideas of Hindu-reformers such as vegetarianism, rejection of castes and integrated global changes of the 19th century, such as monotheism, into a rural and tribal context of Odisha.

ON THE CONTINUITY OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

In the light of the diversity and historical depth of the diverse religious traditions in India, the question remains as to how cultural heritage and its social organization, and everyday norms were experienced in the everyday life of the 19th century and what was remembered of the “cultural memory” (Halbwachs 1997/1950) of the past. Although the time of the Vedic religion has long passed, the Vedic texts remain and are still “heard” (*śruti*) and “remembered” (*smṛti*). The continuity of their reception and interpretation

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means, on the one hand, the continuity of an elitist and hierarchical religious system and, on the other hand, the “democratization” of a once esoteric Brahmanic knowledge. This is articulated in the form of collective ideas and values that stem from the complex body of Vedic literature and liturgical ritual rules and practices. What used to be, in the Vedic period, only the privilege of the priests, started with the reforms of Neo-Hinduism and the formal democratization of India – an option for all. When Srinivas spoke of a Brahmanization or Sanskritization (see Srinivas 1962), he was referring to such modern imitation- and acquisition-processes of the Vedic cultural heritage.

It is similar with the most widely known divinities, Viṣṇu, Śiva and the Goddess, who are revered in many places in local variations and continue to enjoy great popularity because of their lively commemoration in rituals. The reverence for the Goddess belongs from pre-colonial times to the main elements of the local religiosity of a popular Hinduism (see Fuller 1992): village goddesses that create, punish, and destroy the world and its people (see Kinsley 1985/1988). Examples of continuous local veneration of the Goddess and her importance as well as for individuals as for the collective are exemplified by, for example, Obeyesekere (1984) and Basu (2001). Obeyesekere illustrates the traditional phenomena of possession through the Goddess, showing the respective cosmos of meaning for the individual and the individual social surroundings. Basu depicts the traditional centrality of the Goddess in the collective memory of a royal bardic caste of the Charan of Western India. Living personifications of the Goddess represent ascetic and chaste Charan women who are revered as *mātājīs*, living goddesses. The living goddesses embody the social organization of a caste, its ideals, local histories and identities in relation to the memory of the local kingdom. Linking the Goddess to the memory of a local kingdom in South Asia is thus both a historical as well as a present-day socio-ritual

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phenomenon (see Tambs-Lyche 1997; Schnepel 1995). The emergence of strong female spiritual, political and literary charismatic leaders of the 19th century has strongly built on the legacy and continuity of the belief in the power and vitality of living local goddesses.

LIVING HISTORICAL CONTINUITY OF TRADITIONAL IDEAL TYPES

In the South Asian context of the 19th century, historical “ideal types” perpetuate the cultural continuity of ancient and Hindu reformist ideas. These free themselves from historical contexts and generate new forms of lived practice. The idea of ritual purity survives, e.g., in the form of the Brahmin priest as a value model and as the nineteenth-century Hindu reformer and spiritual educator. Not only do the classical codes of social and religious behaviour derive from the Brahmanical specialization and status, but also the Brahman represents to the present day the model that others strive to imitate, as witnessed by the increase in “Sanskritisation” (...) among non-Brahmins, and especially among the harijan” (Heesterman 1985:26). The Brahmanic ritual specialist becomes the ideal Brahman who already with Gandhi’s idealisation of a Brahman (Kiran 2016) is exemplarily involved in social and/or political activities – e.g., in education and/or welfare work, such as the Brahmanical Svadhyaya reform-movement in Gujarat (Guzy 1998). In the same manner, the Brahmanic vegetarian ideal daily displaces local carnivorous ritual techniques, something, e.g., that one can observe in the ideal of vegetarianism and the continuous degree of vegetarianism among indigenous groups in India (See Mallebrein 2007).

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As already noted in relation to the distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti* in Vedic literature, the memory of the congealed Vedic body of philosophical ideas is socially perpetuated through ideal types of values, becoming the model for individual lives and spiritual educational reforms of the 19th century Neo-Hinduism. This is how the socio-religious Vedic system of ideas and values revitalizes itself in a modern variation of Hinduism but modifies integrating modernizing and emancipatory global and universalist influences.

In nineteenth-century Neo-Hinduism, traditional religious ideas amalgamate with modern techniques and Western political and legal systems. In this “inclusivist characteristic” (Hacker 1957: 167-179), which connects a changing, emancipating, reforming consciousness with its heritage of diverse local and regional traditions, lived religiosity corresponds to the traditionally inclusivist nature of “Hinduism”, with its locally specific social organization and its every day norms relating to regional South Asian ideal-types, values, and ideas. With the rise of Indian nationalism and the Neo-Hinduism of the 19th century, the emergence of Hindu nationalism has shifted from a political minority to a political mainstream, visible today in rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As such, Neo-Hinduism unifies hierarchical cultural Hindu value-ideas and concepts, with an ethnic, national and global agenda, capitalizing strongly on local cultures and their religious values and ideas. The hybrid play of culture, social structure, nation, and global play remains a constant dynamic of power and authority on a local, regional, and geopolitical level.

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