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Review: The Left-Right Subcastes in South India: A Critique (Review Article)

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THE LEFT-RIGHT SUBCASTES IN SOUTH INDIA:  
A CRITIQUE  
*Review Article*

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I

This is a fine book, one of the best ethnographies of South Asia I have read. It is a rich social structural study of a region in South India, the Konku Natu, and in many ways represents a unique approach to ethnography. In general anthropologists have favoured the intensive study of a single community: the study of the region is at best secondary. Brenda Beck's approach is to study a series of interlocking territorial based social structures important in indigenous thinking: the larger region Konku Natu, one of the five traditional regions in Tamilnadu (Madras state); the subregion; the revenue village; the hamlet (*ur*) and the individual household (*Kutumpam*). Each unit is described in great detail, and its position in the larger setting is contextualized. Thus the five regions (NATU) are described in general terms: and the Konku in depth, illustrating the place of the specific region within the larger administrative unit. So it is for the other units: the region has twenty-four subregions, but the author studies in detail the *Kankayam natu*, furnishing in-depth information on this subregion; and so on. Each unit is dealt with in an orderly and systematic way in a single chapter. The social units are presented in a diminishing order of size, the smaller the unit the more intensively is it studied. Thus the fifth unit—the household is studied microscopically as it were, in very rich detail.

It is a highly innovative approach, and is a 'model' for approaching the study of the larger region within which is contained the local community. But it is obviously no easy task and requires a thorough familiarity with the language and culture of the whole region. An extraordinary amount of patient research has gone into the book: tables and maps with the pertinent sociological information are presented to the reader every step of the way, so that the book, though difficult to read, has a clear, systematic argument running through it.

The book has two main theoretical approaches: on the one hand in its empirical detail the work is in the best tradition of British social anthropology, in particular the *internal structure* of the hamlet and household units (chapters 4 & 5) where marriage alliance, descent groups, and familial units are discussed. The detailed study of caste precedence based on a Guttman scale (and influenced by MacKim Marriott's work) is also of this order (160-74). Over and above this level of analysis is a struc-

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tural one, in the French sense of the term: a preoccupation with oppositions, and binary categories. On this level the author transcends grubby empiricism altogether. The major structural feature is the division of the social groups (subcastes) of the region, village and hamlet into two overarching social divisions: right and left (table 1, page 5). This is an indigenous classification, which the author claims, is central to understanding the empirical reality described by her. Thus if the society is hierarchically organised in terms of castes (or subcastes), as it is all over India, they are also organised into left:right divisions, in this region. The several *different* castes in each binary division have *common* attributes manifest at every level of social organisation in opposition to the subcastes of the other division. Cutting across the *jati* and *varna* structure is the dualism of right and left, which is also crucial in determining status, style of life and religious orientations of each division. I find the social anthropology consistently excellent; by contrast I have some misgivings regarding the 'structural' argument which I will pin-point in the following pages.

## II

The proper understanding of left:right dualism, according to the author, requires a philosophical perspective on Indian civilisation. Both *varna* and the dualistic scheme depend on Indian notions of *power*, she says. Thus the Brahmin has power over the gods and the cosmos; the Kshatriya over mortals, the Vaisya (and economically affluent castes) over material things. I find this notion of power too diffuse: if everything is power, then nothing is power also. It is not then useful for analytical purposes unless of course this idea of power is an indigenous notion, conceptualised in language (which is doubtful). Purity is power also. . . . 'For the Hindu . . . purity is linked to the ultimate power that human beings can achieve, control over the elements of the universe through control of one's intimate physical processes' (7). I know of no Hindu who believes in this preposterous idea, except perhaps in fantasy, and furthermore such an interpretation seems unwarranted in terms of Hindu philosophy. This vague definition of power is central to her argument, since the left:right distinction is based on it. 'The bifurcate body serves as a metaphorical expression of how rivalries for status develop in an actual social setting, given this concept of social hierarchy based on different types of power' (8).

How does this process occur? The Brahmins are axiomatically on top of the social ladder; once this is granted the allocation of prestige is difficult and the Kshatriya-landowner category must stand out in opposition to them. Subcastes bound to the landowner subcaste by *jajmani* ties will align on that side: the right. The other groups move to the *left*, emulating the Brahmin scheme of values. Strictly speaking, she argues, the Brahmin (and the Narunikar Pillai subcaste of scribes) are neutral or may be viewed 'as forming the "head" for that social order' (xvi). Thus the image is that of a 'body social', with the head Brahmin, and the two sides, right and left.

Several difficulties arise at this point.

(a) The left:right classification is widespread in India (and elsewhere), but the 'head' and 'body social' idea is Beck's own. Now the Indian idea of the body politic is embedded in the *varna* scheme, head: Brahmin; arms: Kshatriya; belly:

Vaisya; feet: Sudra. The right:left distinction in other contexts is never associated with the body politic idea in India at all. Brenda Beck takes the body-politic idea in the *varna* scheme and superimposes it on the right:left scheme, viz.

head  
left                      right

Contrary to Beck it seems to me that the indigenous distinction is unequivocally left:right, and is altogether a different type of classificatory principle from the 'body social' one.

(b) The head (Brahmin) is somewhat tilted to the left since it is a model for the left castes. The left castes, according to the author, emphasise Brahmanic values, ritual purity, textual learning and the great philosophical traditions (234), whereas the right division is less particular on all these dimensions. There is I feel something fundamentally wrong here. In almost every other context the left:right distinction is associated with ideas like impure: pure; unpropitious: propitious. For example, in Indian thinking circumambulation clockwise is an auspicious *right* movement; and anti-clockwise circumambulation is a *left* and inauspicious movement, associated with death, and the kind of inferior ritual noted by the author herself (206). Finally the left hand is polluted, whereas the right is the noble one.

This being the case it seems strange, in Hindu society, that the very castes who emphasise ritual and sacred tradition should be classed as inferior (left) in contrast to those who are more given to meat eating and non-traditional practices (right). Furthermore the author's claim that the left division castes emphasise these Hindu values are contradicted by the data: the most polluting castes, like leatherworkers, are *also* on the left, and it is inconceivable to me that five inferior left castes (C., D. and E. in table 1, p. 5) would emphasise the Hindu *philosophical* traditions. Clearly, the dualistic system has to be explained differently.

### III

The first methodological error of the author is that her splendid ethnographic data of *the present day* are reclassified in terms of a left:right scheme of a historical *past*. Though one may dispute Burton Stein's claim that the intense factionalism and open conflicts between the two divisions in the post-fourteenth century Vijayanagara period indicate the decline of this dualistic system, even Brenda Beck admits that its viable presence was in 'earlier centuries' (xiv) (Stein 1969: 196). The custom had badly declined in the early nineteenth century when Abbé Dubois was writing (Dubois & Beachamp 1906). The author's own information was collected from the memories of six informants who could not agree among themselves (xv). Furthermore the author admits that the left:right division is not altogether clear: one of the largest on the left, the Mutaliyars in fact have it both ways (233), and have 'divisional ambivalence' (239). In fact, as you go down the status hierarchy the divisions get blurred (8), which means that most of the castes in fact have 'divisional ambivalence'. The methodological problem is, how can one order present empirical reality according to categories no longer employed by the people themselves? The likelihood is that the categories are no longer employed because they are *inapplicable to present day society*. The sociological problem then is why the categories are no longer employed, the very opposite of the author's. This must in

turn bring us to modern demographic and socio-economic changes which the author, given her synchronic structuralist orientation, simply does not discuss. Also, in order to study its onetime operative significance, one has to see the evolution of this dualism in historical perspective.

One sociological characteristic of the left:right division is reasonably clear from the author's work, and Hutton (1961: 70) and Stein (1969: 187), namely the distinction between artisan groups (left) and agriculturalists (right). Furthermore, Beck shows that in general the right groups are involved in traditional service (*jajmani*) relationships with the dominant Vellalar Kavuntars, whereas the left are not. The left do not refer disputes to the dominant caste council (77). The evidence in chapter one, and from the myths (91-93) is that the Vellalar Kavuntars, the present day dominant caste of Konku region, were the first settlers in that area, followed by the Natars. The lower castes formed a stable core round the dominant Kavuntar in a *jajmani* network, as the author herself recognises. From the fourteenth century onwards there were several waves of immigration into Konku, culminating in the seventeenth century when the first references to the division 'began to appear in the historical material concerning Konku' (32). If so it seems to me that the left:right division historically viewed was a mechanism for incorporating these immigrant, alien castes into the Konku regional and local social structure. Wherefore? The traditional groups revolving round the dominant Kavuntars were, as everywhere, oriented to the *varna* scheme. With the massive entry of immigrant castes the problem of incorporating these immigrant castes, generally artisans of indeterminate status, into the pre-existing operative *varna* scheme of the region would be difficult, yet it has to be done. One way to do this is to employ another well-known Indian classificatory device, the left:right scheme, so that the castes involved in the existent pattern of traditional services are 'right', and the immigrants are the 'left'. Historically therefore the division is immigrant: settler; sociologically the division provides a charter for incorporating immigrant castes, isolating those castes involved in traditional ties with the dominant caste from the outsiders. Since power is with the dominant caste, its side can arrogate for itself the higher, propitious division (right).

The processes of immigration culminating in the formation of the left:right division in Konku in the seventeenth century, probably occurred much earlier in other parts of South India. Stein says that the Vellalars were dominant in many parts of South India from the ninth century (Stein 1969). Thus the system of land and *jajmani* relationships was an ancient and enduring part of South Indian society. Immigrant groups—of all sorts—were pressing on this area, for a variety of social and historical reasons, and the dual division provided a mechanism for incorporating them into the local society *without incorporating them (or most of them) into the JAJMANI system*. In other words these patterns of immigration were an early and continuing process in south India.

#### IV

Viewed in this historical perspective the distinction is not between the Brahmanic orthodox, ritualistic orientation of left and the mundane power interests of the right. In India, the Brahmins and the dominant caste, as Dumont has noted, have always been involved in orthodoxy, and the *varna* scheme (Dumont 1958: 55-8).

The Brahmin head seems to me tilted to the *right*, contra Beck. Left religiosity is oriented differently: *not to the Brahmin but, perhaps, to the SANYASIN ideal*.

Left groups, I suggest, are oriented to a non-Vedic religiosity, more in keeping with artisans, and uprooted immigrant groups generally. In this sense, left castes are non-traditional both in terms of service (*jajmani*) relationships as Beck states, and also in religious terms (which she denies). But this perspective fits better the Indian idea of left-ness and enables us to understand why the left side is inferior both sociologically and in terms of religious orthodoxy.

This model of religiosity—the *sanyasin* model of the left—makes sense in relation to the data presented by the author herself.

(a) The religious leaders of the left groups were wandering *gurus*, who travel around for most of the year, unanchored to fixed places of worship (74–7), thus better fitting the *sanyasin* model.

(b) In fact the headmen of left subcastes are called *sanyasins* (*canyacis*), ‘whose life style stresses celibacy and dependence on the alms of the devotees’ (13). This is not an imitation of Brahmin behaviour as the author thinks (12).

(c) If left groups were textually oriented and orthodox they would emphasise hierarchy, which is a prime orthodox value. But in fact they stress the opposite: ‘all devotees are treated as equals at left caste festivals’ (16). Such behaviour is heterodox, more in keeping with the *sanyasin*, rather than Brahmanic ideal.

(d) The *sanyasin* is preeminently someone outside the *varna* scheme and the status system: orientation towards this form of religiosity would appeal to immigrants who are not involved in traditional agricultural production. Also the *sanyasin*, like the Buddhist monk, is in touch with pollution, but his religiosity transcends it (Yalman 1962; 1973). Hence Untouchables can be attracted to, and incorporated into, this scheme which is more tolerant of their status. It is interesting to note that the untouchable caste on the *right*—the Paraiyars—are in fact more concerned with purity than the left leatherworkers, a finding more consonant with my interpretation than the author’s (168, 170). I use the term ‘*sanyasin*’ advisedly, to refer to various types of heterodox religiosity, in opposition to Brahmanic orthodoxy. Historically the left has probably incorporated the anti-Brahmanic religiosity of the South.

(e) Finally my interpretation better accords with a similar religious division in northern India: the left:right *tantra*, where the left (relatively speaking) represents a more heterodox religiosity than the right. However it is likely that left religiosity is not a product of its ‘leftness’ *per se* but rather a reflection of the heterodox religiosity of artisans and uprooted peoples.

The author presents data to show clearly that the castes on the two sides have not only opposed religious orientations, but also differ on certain crucial sociological dimensions, *viz.* different marriage rules, descent organisations, residence and so forth. Let us consider the argument on residence.

The author states that since the left groups are more attuned to traditional law books they will be ‘more sensitive than their right division counterparts to the patrilocal ideal set forth in the classical law books’ . . . (234). They will also be less inclined to uxorilocality which is unclassical, and more towards neolocality which supports the classical position (234–5). In fact the author’s statistics in table 5.7 re-analysed do not bear out her own contention. Here we find that 83.3 per cent. of

the unclassical right practise patrilocality as against 66.6 per cent. of the left, which supports the opposite position! (p. 235, table 5.7). The data on uxori-locality are not opaque either because the right wing Natars seem to be an exception having six times the uxori-locality as the two castes who come next, the dominant Kavuntars (right, 6.0 per cent.) and Acari (left, 6.2 per cent.). It would seem that high uxori-locality among Natars is not paralleled in any caste, left or right, and hence seems to be determined by economic factors specific to that caste of palmyra palm tappers. If we exclude the Natars there seems no significant difference in left/right uxori-locality. Also, the dominant right caste, Kavuntars whose numbers constitute 74 per cent. of the right division are low on uxori-locality. However it is true that neolocality is high among the left groups, but this indicates, contrary to Beck, its *untraditional* nature, for who ever heard of neolocality enjoined in classical law books?

I think the implication is sufficiently clear. The various social structural similarities on each side, are based not on left-ness or right-ness *per se*, but on socio-economic factors. Thus the author says joint living is due to left leanings but adds: 'These general right-left differences in attitude toward joint living are obscured, however by the tendency for all higher ranking communities to have a higher proportion of joint families . . .' (210) i.e. socio-economic variables seem the operative ones. Again: 'right division communities . . . make a distinction between paternal and maternal grandparents', but later she recognises that this may be due to variations in the descent principle (229). It seems to be that many of the sociological features of the two divisions (see pages 70–108) rest on the economic dominance of the Kavuntar, and their relationships with the rest of the right section, and the lack of roots of the left communities in the traditional agrarian economy. Thus the higher rate of literacy of the left is due not so much to their orientation towards classical learning (212, 264) but due to their emancipation from the agricultural process and *jajmani* system, their mobility, and greater orientation towards achieved statuses (76–77).

Perhaps a true test of whether the left:right division indicates a classical orientation or not would be to take those sociological variables which may be partially influenced at least by classical values: attitudes to divorce, sexual morality, widow remarriage. However the author does not present this evidence. My own guess is that these norms would be applied in a more flexible manner in the left side of the division.

## V

To sum up, the major methodological weakness is the unhappy alliance between empirical social anthropology and structuralism. The imposition of a structural orientation does produce aesthetic elegance so that the 'whole is like a set of Chinese boxes, each unit having roughly the same shape, while fitting neatly inside the previous container' (208). What is *inside* the boxes constitutes excellent social anthropology, but unhappily the focus on the neat fit of the boxes sometimes tends to obscure historical factors and socio-economic and demographic variables which are to me the significant and operative ones. Nevertheless, the book is a truly fine piece of research, and should be on the shelf of every methodologically minded anthropologist.

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