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Family Ties and the Entanglements of Caste

By JOSEPH BERGER

Published: October 24, 2004

As an Indian immigrant, Dr. Both Das faced an excruciating challenge. His three daughters had been exposed to America's freewheeling mating rituals, but he wanted to find them husbands the old-fashioned way - within the Hindu caste into which he was born.

With his eldest daughter, Abha - the one who had spent the least time growing up in America - he hit the jackpot, getting her to return to India in 1975 to wed a man she had never met but who hailed not only from the same Kayashta subcaste but also from the same obscure offshoot. With his second daughter, Bibha, he was less successful. She married a Kayashta, but from a different branch.

"So there was some transgression in this marriage," Dr. Das, a silver-haired cardiologist in the Bronx, said with a wry stoicism worthy of another father who struggled with three modern-minded marriageable daughters, Tevye of "Fiddler on the Roof."

Dr. Das's third daughter, Rekha, the most Americanized, strayed even further. She refused to return to India to find her mate and married a man outside her father's caste whom she met in school. It was what Indians call "a love marriage." And Dr. Das's losing battle to uphold tradition is about to suffer yet another setback: a grandson plans to marry a non-Indian Christian from Chicago whom he met at Harvard.

As Dr. Das's experience shows, the peculiarly Indian system of stratifying its people into hierarchical castes - with Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom - has managed to stow away on the journey to the United States, a country that prides itself on its standard of egalitarianism, however flawed the execution. But the caste system, weakening for a half-century in India, is withering here under the relentless forces of assimilation and modernity. While it persists, its vestiges today often seem more a matter of sentiment than cultural imperative.

To be sure, not just marital arrangements but business relations are sometimes colored by caste. Arun K. Sinha, a member of the Kurmi caste, is owner of the Foods of India store, a shop on Curry Hill at Lexington Avenue and 28th Street in Manhattan. He complains that wholesalers from a Gujarati caste insist that he pay cash rather than extend the credit they give to merchants from their own clan.

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The Das family, clockwise from left: Dr. Both Das, his son-in-law Rabintra Mallik, his daughters Rekha and Abha, his wife, Usha, and their grandson, Amit Mallik.

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E. Valentine Daniel, a professor of anthropology at Columbia University, says some Indian executives will not hire untouchables, now usually called Dalits, or downtrodden, no matter their qualifications. "It's even more than a glass ceiling, it's a tin roof," he said.

Mr. Daniel, former director of Columbia's South Asian Institute, told of the resistance he faced among upper-caste Indians on an academic committee when he wanted to name an endowed chair in Indian political economics after a noted untouchable, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Columbia graduate who helped draft the Indian Constitution, which decades ago abolished the caste system.

Sometimes, the caste distinctions, recognizable by family names and places of origin, linger as a form of social snobbery. Keerthi Vadlamani, a 23-year-old chemical engineer from an affluent Brahmin family in the south-central Indian city of Hyderabad, said, "Some people are stupid enough not to mingle with a Dalit, to cold-shoulder them.

"You won't invite them home, you won't go over to their home," he said.

Other upper-caste Indians here say that they do not bother to probe someone's caste and that most compatriots will do business with anyone. Few Indians would admit to such behavior as refusing to eat in a restaurant because its food was cooked by an untouchable, something many upper-caste Indians might have done 50 years ago.

Mostly caste survives here as a kind of tribal bonding, with Indians finding kindred spirits among people who grew up with the same foods and cultural signals. Just as descendants of the Pilgrims use the Mayflower Society as a social outlet to mingle with people of congenial backgrounds, a few castes have formed societies like the Brahmin Samaj of North America, where meditation and yoga are practiced and caste traditions like vegetarianism and periodic fasting are explained to the young.

"Right now my children are living in a mixed-up society," said Pratima Sharma, president of the New Jersey chapter of Brahmin Samaj and a 39-year-old software trainer with two daughters, 9 and 3. "That's why I went into the Brahmin group, because I wanted to give my children the same values."

The exquisitely complex Indian caste system dates back thousands of years to the origins of Hinduism. Hindus tell of a deity who transformed himself into a human society arranged according to a cooperative division of labor. The deity's head turned into the Brahmin caste of priests and scholars, his hands into the Kshatriya caste of warriors and administrators, his thighs into the merchant and landholding Vaishyas, and his feet into Shudras, the skilled workers and peasants. Hindu notions of ritual purity and pollution defined how these four broad castes could interact and reserved an underclass rung for the untouchables, who worked in the most "polluting" jobs like cleaning streets or toilets.

Whatever its economic and religious foundations, the caste system - which in time sprouted more than 3,000 jati, or subcastes, tinged by geography, language and employment - became ironbound. Until recent decades, village untouchables would step out of view whenever a Brahmin walked by, and tea stalls would reserve separate dishware for Dalit. The rigid system confined people in lower castes to poverty, said Dr. Parmatma Saran, a professor of sociology at Baruch College, so that economic class often paralleled caste.

After India gained independence from Britain in 1947, the legal forms of caste were abolished, and lower castes began benefiting from favorable quotas for government jobs and college entry. By the mid-1960's, the social aspects of the system were also slackening among urban and educated sectors of Indian society, precisely the groups that furnished most of the doctors, engineers and other professionals who began coming to the United States under preferences in immigration law.

Then something surprising happened here. Madhulika S. Khandelwal, director of the Asian American Center at Queens College, said that the continuing influx of immigrants brought in less-educated relatives who tended to sustain caste distinctions, and created masses of caste members who could associate conveniently with one

another. In the 2000 census, there were 454,686 Indians in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan area.

Ads in New York City's Indian newspapers testify to the persistence of caste, with one family advertising for a "Brahmin bride" and another seeking an "alliance for U.S.-educated, professionally accomplished" Bengali Kayashta daughter.

"The underlying hope is that you have a woman or man from the same caste," Dr. Khandelwal said of such matchmaking ads. "That way the marriage supports the family tradition. You are assuring, to the best of your ability, to live through those traditions expressed in food, dress, vocabulary and other things."

Still, the exposure of younger Indians to American ways continues to chip away at even these caste traditions. Mr. Vadlamani, the chemical engineer, said members of his Brahmin family "find it hard to digest that I eat meat, that I date girls not in the same caste." His parents, significantly, do not object.

Ranjana Pathak, a quality-control chemist on Long Island, maintains many Brahmin traditions. Last week, she was eating only fruit to mark an Indian festival. But she has found other traditions hurtful. Though she agreed to an arranged marriage, her in-laws disapproved of her coming from a lower subcaste of Brahmins.

"Until today it has left a bitter taste in my mouth, and those are things you never forget," she said. "That's why I won't do it to my children."

There are, of course, young people attached to the old ways. Hariharan Janakiraman, a 31-year-old software engineer who lives in Queens, is a Brahmin from the Vadama branch, which emphasizes teaching. Choosing engineering was his one rebellion. But he intends to let his parents select his wife from his caste.

His parents, he said, will consult his horoscope and that of the bride and make sure their planets and attendant moods are aligned. They will, he said, ask the prospective bride to prepare some food and sing and dance, the latter to make sure all her limbs work.

"If I marry people from other castes, my uncle and aunt won't have a good impression of my parents, so I won't do that," he said. "If I get married to a Dalit girl, the way she was brought up is different from the way I was brought up, so some incompatibility will result."

Dalits say they still on occasion sense upper-caste scorn. Pinder Paul is a spirited 50-year-old Punjabi Sikh (the Sikh faith absorbed some caste distinctions) who came to New York City in 1985 and worked as a dishwasher at Tad's Steaks. Now he and his wife spend seven days a week running the Chirping Chicken outlet he owns in Astoria. He could cite no instance of outright discrimination, but said looks and gestures sometimes betray upper-caste condescension.

"Our friends who came here from India from the upper classes, they're supposed to leave this kind of thing behind, but unfortunately they brought it with them," he said.

Yet in a paradoxical demonstration of the stubborn resilience of caste, Mr. Paul is active with a local Dalit group and said he would prefer that his son marry a Dalit.

"We want to stay in our community," he said.

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