

Feb. 17, 2012; Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Back to Caste and Tribal Peoples

I have had so many conversations about caste in India. The topic is pervasive, complicated and sensitive, not unlike dialogues about race and ethnicity in America. No need for a mini-lecture on the history of caste: suffice it to say that for many centuries Indian identities have been shaped by religious affiliation (*esp.* Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain and Christian); diverse cultural and linguistic groupings (Dravidian in the South and Aryan in the North); and a complicated system of caste that basically is broken down into four major categories (with Brahmin as the educated elite) and the "Untouchables" as below caste affiliation. The latter are a huge percentage of India's population; and historically, they were denied social advancement and educational opportunities and were, by "birthright" (ironic usage in this context) relegated to either the lowest forms of menial labor including cleaning toilets and excrement, digging graves, or picking up garbage ... or to begging. In his effort to rid India of the rigid, inhumane system, Gandhi renamed this below-caste group as *Harijan* (Children of God), but the enduring label used by most people and by English-language journalists and scholars is *Dalit*.

In the United States the immediate and distinctive marker for race and ethnicity are skin pigmentation and facial features. Of course, over time, though intermarriage our own ability (and willingness) to differentiate on the basis of racial and ethnic identity is beginning to fade. Still, Cornel West reminds us Americans — in a progressive way — that *Race (still) Matters*; but caste consciousness in India is more subtle, less immediately apparent, and perhaps more pervasive. When I ask people to tell me how they are able to tell someone's caste, there is no single response. Rather it appears to be a host of factors including name, apparel, religious affiliation, occupation, economic status, and home neighborhood. To further complicate matters, there are plenty of Brahmin who are down on their luck and have very little money; and, by now, there are hundreds of thousands of Dalits who have climbed India's social and economic ladder and gained entry into the prosperous and growing middle class. Some Indian friends tell me that one can always tell who are the Brahmin by their distinctive use of language, a Sanskrit-derived vocabulary, and a certain attitude of grace, even grace-under-pressure. To me, this has a similar tone of European aristocracy and gentry, some of whom may be down on their luck in a new, modern/postmodern culture; however, since the Brahmin's status historically has been as intellectual and spiritual elite, the loss of wealth in itself need not diminish their status.

Although the category of *Untouchable* has been illegal ever since India became her own nation, the government has implemented a set of rights, incentives, and quotas specially for "scheduled" and "backward" caste peoples as well as for the several millions of Tribal peoples across India. I learned on the one hand that if an individual or family converted to either Islam

or Christianity then in both informal social terms and in formal governmental program terms, that these converts no longer retain their caste identity. (Both religions, of course, place a primary emphasis upon social equality in the here-and-now, although, caste divisions and tensions exist within both religious communities in India as well.) On the other hand, there is some practical risk for such a conversion for a backward or scheduled caste person, since then he/she could be sacrificing an entire set of possible educational and career entitlements designed to address historic inequities. A few middle-caste Indians have complained to me that Dalits have gained so many rights so quickly (including high elected offices as city collectors [mayors] and state governors) that some have become aggressive and abused their newly acquired status and power, engaging in patronage and succumbing to ubiquitous temptations of bribery and graft, too. Another individual told me that all Indian political parties and politicians had to pay close attention to the three largest voting blocs across the nation: Muslims, women and Dalits. I listen carefully, refrain from passing judgment, and note that tone and body language is a bit strained, sometimes voices becomes quieter; and I think to myself: this is the personal politics of caste in India today.

During my trip to Salem and Yercaud (northern Tamil Nadu) in a tropical highland area full of teak trees and coffee plantations, I spent one evening in downtown Salem — bustling, overflowing with people, lots and lots of large, flashing neon advertising, new electronics and computer shops, an Adidas men's clothing store, huge number of shoe stores, women's Sari and fine cloth shops, and, as usual, hugely congested streets, constantly honking traffic of all kinds (including both luxury and battered, public buses on their way to Mysore, Bangalore and Chennai; motorcycles and auto rickshaws galore, a few ox-drawn carts, upscale, late model Toyotas, Tatas, VW's...). And, yet, within one hour I had climbed a thousand meters above the city and found myself at a quiet mountain retreat (both secular and religious-based!). I was also told that there were many tribal families and villages in these highlands.

I recall being astonished during my last trip to Tamil Nadu to discover that there is a sizeable population (est. more than 80 million) of tribal peoples across India, also known as Adivasi. Most are legally categorized as "scheduled tribal peoples" (roughly on social and legal par with the Dalits) while others are listed as "Primitive Tribal Groups." These are India's equivalent to First Nations people of Canada, the Aborigines of Australia, and our own Native American populations. These are peoples who, at least until recently, lived in rural, inaccessible areas with minimal contact with the Hindu mainstream let alone Christian missionaries or Muslim leaders. Ancient Hindu and Muslim empires passed them by as did European colonialism and mission "outreach." In current terms of legal rights, grants, and various forms of government funded outreach, tribal peoples have been categorized with backward caste peoples, and they, too, qualify for state support for education and job placement.

Several weeks ago I read *The Scar*, an autobiographical work by K.A. Gunasekaran. Gunasekaran writes about his childhood and youth in the Parayar caste growing up as a designated tribal boy in rural Tamil Nadu during the post-Independence period: 1950s and 60s. He tells stories of blatant, unapologetic, caste-based discrimination including outright violence and hatred but does so without claiming status as a victim, free from emotional embellishment, and always with an eye toward events and circumstances that somehow serve as enlightening, humane exceptions to the harsh social and economic realities of Tamil rural life. Interestingly, besides the absence of a clear time line, there is never any reference to India's Freedom Fighters, Independence, the Raj, communal (religious-based) violence; and, I believe, only a single passing reference to Mahatma Gandhi. In short, this is a tale told from an "untouchable," a tribal boy's perspective whose idea of a sophisticated and complex city is found in Madurai, perhaps 25 distant kilometers away.

Through Gunasekaran's honest voice and simplicity I encountered another way of life: very poor, usually hungry, often discriminated against by those in upper castes but also rich in unique folkways and family connections. For example, the glossary is full of such familial words as *thambi* (younger brother), *machan* (son of one's maternal uncle or paternal aunt), *annan* (elder brother), and *cinamma* (Mother's sister or father's second wife) and so forth. Moreover, Gunasekaran (who grows up to be a professor and dean of the school of performing arts in Pondicherry, South India) has a talent for singing and dancing that serves him well as a young lad. The reader learns about how much the arts are valued among the Tamil people; and there is a veritable orchestra of unusual instruments including a *thapartai*, a small drum hung around the shoulders; *jalras*, a type of cymbal used to keep time; *othoodi kuzhal*, a long wind instrument ... and many of these are used during *kavadi*, a folk dance usually performed with peacock feathers.

Perhaps because young Gunasekaran almost always shared limited food with extended family members and was always hungry, there are thoughtful reflections on Tamil village meals and food preparations, including fish, tropical fruits, and a diverse range of rice-based preparations including *appam*, *dosai*, and *panniyaram* as well as *sambar* (of course). Other forms of meat in one's diet were unheard of, and only one or two references are made to the occasional Hindu sacrifice of a goat. And, speaking of religion, particular fascinating is Gunasekaran's childhood understanding of Hindus, Christians, and Muslims — all of whom played a significant role in the villages in which his family lived and worked. His was a religion of personal contact, convenience and availability rather than chosen doctrine and dogma or weekly worship. Christianity was great at Christmas for singing and receiving generous gifts from local priests; Muslims were among Gunasekaran's best friends since they never engaged in harsh caste practices and always shared their food; and the Hindus were, well, a mixed bag: with scary Hindu gods in local temples and severely enforced caste delineations in the villages but also

capable of humane outreach and civility (especially upon reaching the "metropolis" of Madurai.)

GK Gunasekaran ends his book as social advancement and the completion of a college degree (against so many odds) come his way. He is modest; his prose is matter-of-fact; and by the end, I felt I had gained an intimate, inside look into what it means for a rural, Parayar caste, tribal boy to finish college, earn honors, and receive pay and public recognition for his musical talents.