Kalam Research Forum, KSRDPR University, Gadag
Research Abstract
'Caste System' and Rituals-

Dr.Santhosh Kumar PK
Department of Public Administration

Indian society consists of innumerable castes. We find descriptions of castes everywhere for the last 500 years. Based on such descriptions for over five centuries it has become a part of our commonsense that 'caste system' is deep rooted in India for the last 2000 years. It is believed that caste determines each and every aspect of community life of the people. There is a kind of consensus among the majority of the scholars that caste or the 'caste system' has the capacity to determine individual's status both social and economic, and respect. There is also an attempt to show that 'caste system' does all these through the medium of rituals. In other words, according to this account Indian society is based on 'caste system' which in turn is based on some texts and rituals. In the same way it is believed that 'caste system' has ordered the castes one above the other to create a hierarchical system. Scholars are of the opinion that principles of purity and pollution provide a foundation to this hierarchy. If the above descriptions are true then it means that most of the rituals in fact shape, sustain and reproduce the 'caste system'. The present work is an attempt to challenge this consensual understanding among the scholars with regard to the 'caste system' and its relationship to the rituals. The main aim of this study is to understand the role played by the rituals in our society and also to find out if there is any relationship between castes and the rituals. The central question here is: **Are rituals mechanisms through which 'caste system' gets represented and reproduced?** We can further sharpen this question and ask: **Is there any relationship between the social status of the caste and its rituals?** It is obvious that hierarchy represents status. If rituals create hierarchy then it means that they also determine the status. Therefore, the question whether rituals create status implies the related question whether they create hierarchy.

That there is a relationship between the social status of a caste and rituals is the argument put forward by the theory of 'caste system'. But the explanation of castes

1

and rituals that this theory provides lacks clarity. For example, invoking the concept of sanskritisation it is said that the lower castes imitate the rituals of the upper castes to gain higher status in the society. As opposed to this explanation we have the concept of 'counter culture' which argues that lower castes construct their own status as a protest against upper castes. Such descriptions accomplish nothing except putting forward a circular argument regarding rituals and castes. Therefore the present study would like to take a different route assuming that there may not be any relationship between rituals and castes, with a hope that it may provide a better explanation of the role of the rituals and its relation to castes than the present ones.

This study raises the question: If rituals create social status of any caste or community at different levels and attempts to find answer to the same. Since what is proposed here is merely a hypothesis it will be put to test and this study is open to the possibility of this hypothesis being proved false.

The study begins with the analysis of the studies on 'caste system'. In analyzing the description that 'caste system' constitutes the Indian social structure and that rituals reproduce caste system we have to ask certain basic questions like, what is 'caste system'? And, does caste system define our social structure? Once we get proper answer to this question then one can go further and find out whether rituals reproduce caste system or not? Caste system means different castes finding their existence within a system. The 'facts' about caste system described as its characteristics, together or separately give shape to caste system.

People belonging to a particular caste do not have the same occupation. In the same way it is not possible to show that communities engaged in different occupations do so on the basis of caste. The facts do not corroborate with the understanding that castes are based on occupation. Further, the new theories that criticize theories of caste system also fail in providing any clarity to the description of caste. Quigley, for example, puts forward an alternative argument with the concept of dominant caste to the theory of caste system developed by Louis Dumont and his followers. But he does not clearly (not even vaguely) say how dominant castes control the daily affairs of other castes. When there is no clarity as to what constitutes caste system it follows that descriptions of rituals within the same framework are bound to be equally unclear. Therefore, it is

not surprising that scholars come out with contradictory statements with regard to the relationship between castes and rituals. While some of them are of the opinion that rituals are opposed to caste system yet others argue that they sustain caste system.

Secondly, since it is claimed that rituals are mechanisms of reproducing 'caste system' we need to look into the nature and functions of rituals to test the veracity of this claim. By doing so we can also try to find an answer to the question whether rituals create social status as well. Because, if it is true that rituals create status then logically they also have to crate hierarchy i.e. rituals have to assign specific status and order the participants of the rituals accordingly. But almost all serious studies on rituals up to Fritz Stahl do not suggest anything of that sort. Stahl, in fact empirically proves that rituals are acts that are both without any specific purpose and meaning.

Thirdly, to the question whether there is any link between social status and rituals folklore studies answer in the affirmative. These studies mainly make use of concepts like brahminism, sanskritisation, and counter culture in their accounts. All these concepts make sense only within the framework of 'caste system'. Outside this framework the phenomena that these concepts account for becomes meaningless. To put it differently, these concepts acquire meaning only within the framework of caste system and even when they provide explanation to rituals those explanations become anything but consistent.

Fourthly, the present study takes up the issue whether rituals reproduce caste system by trying to find out the connection, if any, between the so called characteristics of 'caste system' and rituals. According to the scholars, purity-impurity, untouchability, ascriptive status etc. are the characteristics of caste system. And purity-impurity is said to be the basic principle of caste system and it is argued until to this day that the status of communities are determined on the basis of this principle. Therefore, by understanding the nature of the concept of purity-impurity we will be able to know if purity-impurity as a principle reproduces caste system. Purity-impurity is performed during ritual. Rituals consist of set of actions. Various acts like pooja, acts that bring people together, entertainment, cockfight, some acts done after taking bath and some acts without taking bath etc. together make a successful ritual. Purity-impurity is just one of those actions. Again we cannot say that all actions in the ritual are performed on

the basis of purity. In fact most of the actions do not require the notion of purity at all. Therefore, purity-impurity is only a part of the number of practices in the ritual and it remains as a practice. Purity is not even the central concept binding all other practices. It means that what scholars describe as 'caste system' has got nothing to do with the notion of purity-impurity. And since ritual consists of various actions it only gives continuity to those actions.

Lastly, this study indicates the future course of research in this field by identifying the limitations of the present research. By not being able to separate the domain of the ritual and the domain of the social the present work cannot answer the significant question: What constitutes the social domain? This is a major limitation of this study.