Status Evaluation in the Hindu Caste System

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The purpose of this essay is to provide an interim review of the evidence concerning status evaluation in the literature about the Hindu caste system so that, on the one hand, some of the theoretical issues which concern the comparative student of 'caste' may be clarified, and, on the other hand, the many gaps in our knowledge of status evaluation in the Hindu system may be delimited. Our understanding of the Hindu system of today has suffered — through past over-emphasis on historical research — to an extent which becomes apparent only when one takes some specific aspect of it, such as status evaluation, and attempts to relate the theoretical principles derived from the written evidence to the facts of everyday life. It will be shown here that, although our knowledge of Hindu status evaluation far exceeds, in both depth and extent, our knowledge of status evaluation in the West, the evidence upon which we have based our conclusions in the past falls far short, in many respects, of the critical standards now demanded by social anthropologists. Of necessity those who attempt to draw theoretical conclusions from unsatisfactory evidence lay themselves open to errors of judgement; but if, in the process, they can make it easier for others to seek the evidence which will facilitate sounder conclusions, then their work is not entirely in vain. It is with this modest end in view that I have attempted a preliminary analysis of status evaluation, and in the circumstances I do not feel that any apology is necessary for adding to the long list of works — according to Hutton (1946, p.vii), over five thousand — on the Hindu system.

For the purpose of this essay, Hindu society will be considered as a status system based upon a social structure which is segmentary (in the repetitive sense familiar to Africanists) at the lineage level and below, and fissile, in a different way, at the level of endogamous and commensal groups. Status in the system is linked with behaviour-patterns which are themselves linked, in some degree, with particular exogamous units such as lineages and sapinda and pravara groups, but mainly with particular commensal and especially endogamous groups. The first important point to note is that there are two kinds of status — secular status and ritual status — each derived from different sources and socially manifested in different ways. The secular status of individuals within groups, and sometimes even of the groups themselves, is

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1 A. F. Davies (1952), discussing 'prestige of occupations', describes Western studies of status evaluation as being in their infancy. His 'principles' are applicable, mutatis mutandis, to the study of caste status, and this article should be read by all those interested in comparative studies. Davies asks one question — 'How likely is it that ranking studies have forced people into differentiating where they have lacked real incentive?' — which has a deep significance for India. Ghurye (1932), among others, blames the Census inquiries into caste status for the intensification of inter-group rivalries during the present century.

2 In one sense the fission of larger caste groups above the lineage level is also repetitive, since, for example, the fission of endogamous groups produces two or more groups which are also endogamous. Whereas, however, segmentation in lineages produces segments which are precisely similar in all respects (as a general rule), fission of larger groups produces lesser groups which differ in behaviour patterns and status.

3 The terms sapinda and pravara, as here used, denote exogamous groups based respectively upon bilateral kinship and worship of the same (usually three) putative ancestral saints.
variable, and may be determined by such criteria as occupation,¹ skill, education, wealth, land ownership, public office, and even marriage customs.²

In contradistinction to secular status, the ritual status relationship between individuals and groups and between groups of different categories rests wholly upon behaviour-patterns linked with mystical beliefs in general, and mainly upon behaviour linked with a particular corpus of beliefs concerning purity and pollution which I shall label herein the Hindu Pollution Concept. These beliefs underlie what Srinivas (1952, p.75) calls 'good sacredness' and 'bad sacredness'. They define most of the gradations of ritual status between and within caste groups; they mark the limits of 'untouchability' (Ketkar 1909, p.23),³ and they form the major cause of caste fission. They are of great antiquity (Hutton 1946, 155); indeed the elaborate sanitary arrangements of the Harappā culture (Piggott 1950, p.168) suggest that, at any rate, ideas concerning the polluting character of human emissions antedate the Rig-Vedic era. More important than antiquity, however, is the validation of these beliefs – on an all-India scale – by the post–Rig-Vedic Sanskrit sacred literature. In this they are related, through the doctrines of karma and dharma, to the whole body of Hindu cosmology, theology, moral philosophy, and psychology. Every Hindu soul, unless released through extraordinary efforts, must suffer the wanderings of transmigration (samsāra). It is behaviour in each period of worldly existence which determines natal ritual status (karma) in the next existence (Radhakrishnan 1948, p.73; McKenzie 1950, p.39). It is the dharma of every Hindu to obey the rules of behaviour of his natal group (Radhakrishnan 1948, pp.78–80; Srinivas 1952, p.26) until and unless he renounces it or is expelled from it or reaches the age of withdrawal (sanyasi). Thus birth, ritual status, and group patterns of behaviour are interwoven with ideas about the nature of creation and of the after-world, and about morality, purity, and pollution. Ketkar, Sarat Chandra Roy, and Ghurye, among eminent Indian authorities of this century, have held the view that the 'chief principle upon which the entire [caste] system depends is that of purity and pollution' (Hutton 1946, p.155; see also Ketkar 1909, p.121, and Srinivas 1952, p.26).⁴

The mystically oriented behaviour deriving from ideas about purity and pollution will be divided arbitrarily, for purposes of this essay, into two categories which I shall label psychological and social, associated respectively with personal ritual status and group ritual status. Behaviour in what I have labelled the psychological category, which includes control of the

¹Occupation appears to affect both secular and ritual status. As will be seen later herein, many kinds of occupation are shunned by high status groups because they involve a breach of ritual avoidances. On the other hand, as Srinivas (1952, p.28) and Ibbetson (1916, pp.6-7) have pointed out, certain occupations which do not necessarily involve such breaches are nevertheless shunned because they have become associated with low status groups. Again certain occupations, e.g., different branches of leather-work, though falling within the same broad ritual status category, are separated by 'lines of demarcation' into different secular status levels (Ghurye 1932, pp.34–7). Rose (1945, p.984) argues that complexity of ritual in general is also 'a fruitful source of caste formation and ramification', and adds, 'Each grade of priest tends to form a separate sub-caste, and every ministrant in a fane belongs to a caste group'. His argument, however, leads to the conclusion that it is not complexity of ritual in itself, but rather the division of labour within a ritual complex, that leads to fission of caste groups. This emphasis of occupational lines of demarcation by endogamy is not confined to priestly groups, nor are ritual offices the only ones in which lines of demarcation are numerous and complex. The evidence on this important aspect of status evaluation is very vague.

²Here I may note a peculiarity brought out by Chattopadhyay (1952, p.40) in discussing jute labour in India. He found that whereas economic depressions affect the general trend towards the adoption of such high status marriage customs as payment of groom-price instead of bride-price, they have no effect on the trend towards banning widow-marriage. It seems possible that both kinds of status are involved here, and that widow-marriage is a criterion of ritual rather than secular status. In this connexion Rose (1945, pp.981–3) points out that where widow remarriage is permitted at all the ceremony is usually a civil one, since the marriage sacrament is generally 'only once possible for a woman'.

³The practice of untouchability, so-called, has been declared illegal in India, but it cannot yet be said to be dead, nor even moribund, in Hindu life (Anonymous 1953).

⁴Hutton (1946, p.62) goes so far as to say that one manifestation of this principle – the taboo on eating with persons of different or at least lower status – is the 'keystone' of the caste-system, and he sees in this taboo the cause of caste endogamy. The latter assumption is, however, invalidated by his own evidence that many groups treat the whole caste as the commensal unit though component groups are endogamous (Hutton 1946, p.163).
mind and the exclusion of sinful and sensual thoughts, is essentially personal rather than social in its effects upon ritual purity. It is concerned not so much with a person's place in society as with his place in the process of karma; with his personal punya or spiritual merit, and with the actions designed to secure a higher natal ritual status for the individual soul in its next reincarnation. Merit may be acquired through the three pathways of jnana marga, the Path of Wisdom through realized experience; bhakti marga, the Path of Devotion to the deities; and karma marga, the Path of Service (Radhakrishnan 1948, p.82). Merit acquired through the Path of Wisdom affects only the personal ritual status of the individual. Merit acquired through the Path of Devotion may affect the personal ritual status of all the members of a group, since groups as well as individuals can show their devotion by such acts as the building of temples, wells, rest-houses, and hospitals. Merit acquired through the Path of Service – which involves strict adherence to the group ritual rules and avoidances of the natal family and the exogamous, endogamous, and commensal groups to which the individual belongs – appears to have the effect of raising the personal ritual status of the individual above the group ritual status of the groups to which he belongs, thus enabling him to secure, through the process of transmigration, a higher natal status level in his next existence. Personal and group ritual status are of different orders, though they interact. Group ritual status deriving from group patterns of behaviour fixes the natal ritual position of the individual in the caste system, that is, his point of entry into the caste status framework. Personal ritual status is the variant which enables the individual to rise above (or fall below) his natal group ritual status and so establishes his point of departure into the next round of transmigration. But the degree of variation permitted is strictly limited. If an individual separates himself completely from his natal group and leads a life of piety, asceticism, and meditation, he may acquire sufficient merit to release his soul from some, if not all, the reincarnations it is due to suffer, and to become holy and revered1 (Rose 1945, pp.978, 980). On the other hand if the individual remains a social person, integrated into the pattern of group behaviour, and living, eating, and inter-marrying within the group, he retains his group ritual status. Meditation and renunciation of worldly ties in the samyasti or final stage of a person's life might secure betterment of status in his next existence, but as he is an integrated member of his group his social behaviour must conform to that of the group, and it is this group behaviour which fixes group ritual status. Much research will be necessary before we can delve much deeper into the interaction and fields of action of these different kinds of status, but one thing seems certain, that it is from ritual rather than secular status, and from group rather than personal status, that the caste system derives its unique consistency and viability. (For tribal clues see Elwin 1941.)

A good deal has been written about the effect upon caste status of adherence to Brahmanic ritual. We know that, in spite of tolerance of a wide range of different forms of worship of differing deities, ghosts, and spirits, Hinduism recognizes certain standards of orthodoxy in ritual which play an important part in the objective evaluation of ritual status. The lower limits of the upper 'castes' are defined by the restriction of the orthodox2 Brahmanic upanayana ritual of initiation to the duija or 'twice-born' 'castes'. There was a ban, now relaxed, upon the teaching of the Vedas to 'castes' in the Sudra category. The appearance of Brahmanic ritual and Brahman priests in the religious observances of any of the lower 'castes' is recognized

1 An important factor in this free acknowledgment of a ritual status rise through withdrawal from group life is that persons who rise in this way are socially non-competitive. Radhakrishnan (1942, p.137) notes that 'The sramanas who adopt the Buddhist view, and observe the vows of chastity and voluntary poverty, are the equals of the Brahmans.' But this equality is only spiritual. Such persons cannot compete with Brahmans for wealth, or marriage partners, or secular status; their spiritual status implies no social threat.

2 The qualification 'orthodox' is important. Some low 'castes' imitate Brahmanic ritual and wear the sacred thread of the initiate either in its orthodox or in a modified form. But they do not thereby gain status (except, perhaps, vis-a-vis groups of almost equal status) unless they also modify their behaviour patterns to suit Brahmanic ideals.
as a criterion of rising ritual status. But if we judge by public reaction to, for example, complete or modified imitation of the *upanayana* rite by lower 'castes', it seems clear that imitation of higher status group ritual is held to be justifiable only if it follows upon, and does not precede, the acquisition of ritual status by other means, of which the most important is behaviour conforming to the ideals of the Pollution Concept.

Of the concomitant beliefs of the Pollution Concept some – like those concerning human emissions – are rooted in the Sanskrit scriptures (though they may antedate them), and are therefore current throughout India. Others, for example, those concerning the propriety of eating venison or fish (Hutton 1946, p.67), are subject to local variation. There is also a marked decline in the intensity of beliefs about pollution from south to north India (Ghurye 1932, p.8; Hutton 1946, pp.62–3, 69). These regional variations, however, are of degree rather than of kind, and they do not affect the general framework of the caste status system, which has a considerable morphological uniformity throughout India. There are high status groups cleaving more or less closely to the orthodox Brahmanic ideal; there are low status groups regarded, until recently, as completely untouchable, and between these two extremes there are some three thousand 'castes' (Rose 1945, p.979; Hutton 1946, p.2) and innumerable endogamous 'sub-castes' – the Brahman 'caste' alone is divided into some eight hundred of these (Ketkar 1909, p.81) – whose status vis-à-vis each other is always relative and subject to local variation (Senart 1930, p.82; Blunt 1931, pp.100–1; Turner 1931, p.517; Lacey 1933, p.25).

This is one of the most important objections to the use of the term *varna* as a classificatory category in studies of the Hindu caste system. *Varna* once signified a class division. At the beginning of the Rig-Vedic era, the society of the Aryan-speaking conquerors was divided into three classes – Kshatriyas or ruler-warriors, Brahmans or priests, and Vaishyas or traders and cultivators (Rose 1945, p.977). At this period inter-class mobility was free, and caste, as we know it today, had scarcely made its appearance in the Sanskrit Literature (Rose 1945, p.979). Later the position of the first two classes was reversed, and a fourth class – the Sudras or artisans – was added (Blunt 1931, ch.16). As time progressed, the caste system developed into more or less its present form, and a fifth category – the Untouchables – was added, increasing the list of *varna* to five. However, by this time *varna* itself no longer signified an open class in the true sense. It had come to mean a class of *jātis* or endogamous groups (Srinivas 1952, p.24). Individual mobility had disappeared and *jāti* or endogamous group mobility had taken its place. Srinivas (1952, p.25) and Dube (personal communication), among modern Indian anthropologists, see in *varna* a classification which has value for the ordinary Hindu as a means of classifying status groups of regions other than his own in a broad relationship with those of his own area. This may well be so, but there is a difference between broad conventionalized comparisons and critical understanding. Srinivas (1952, pp.24–5) has pointed out the dangers of the *varna* classification in analytical studies of South Indian castes and Blunt’s (1931, pp.333–5) evidence about North Indian castes confirms this view. In the circumstances, I have excluded *varna* from the classificatory terms used in this essay.3

1 Rose (1945, p.980) notes that the ritual status of priestly caste groups is linked with that of the groups to whom they minister (see also Ibbetson 1916, pp.6–7). Thus if a caste group loses status, the ministering priestly group will also lose status unless it severs its connexion. The value of Brahman participation in group ritual as a status criterion depends, therefore, upon the status of the Brahman group itself. This status varies from the highest levels to the untouchable level of the Mahabrahman (Rose 1945, p.980; Hutton 1946, p.69).

2 This is not to say that it did not exist. It is at least possible that the non-Aryan-speaking groups in India were organized, if not on a caste basis, at least on a distinctly hierarchical system of occupational classes (Piggott 1950, p.170).

3 It seems probable that political expediency has something to do with the resurgence of interest in *varna* in modern India. With keen philosophical and psychological insight, reformers seek to justify democratic attacks upon the caste system by an appeal to the early Sanskrit sacred literature. They demand abolition of the ‘modern’ innovation of caste and a return to the ‘original’ *varna* open class system of two thousand years ago. Nevertheless their proposals are often far from clear-cut. Mahatma Gandhi, well known for his attacks upon the social disabilities suffered by the ‘untouchables’, once
It is not sufficiently precise; it cannot be related to the facts on the ground in any given area, nor can it be related to the principles of status evaluation herein discussed. For the same reasons ‘caste’ must also be regarded as a term of doubtful analytical value; indeed it can be argued that the uncritical use of this term has in itself created many of the illusions that exist about the Hindu caste system. It is difficult to pin the term ‘caste’ to any sociological reality. The most important group in the Hindu system is the jāti, or endogamous group (Srinivas 1952, p.24), but this is not a ‘caste’. Nor are ‘castes’ necessarily commensal groups or kinship groups or even – except where caste sabhas unite some commensal and endogamous groups for certain purposes – co-operative units. In the circumstances I have used this term and its derivative ‘sub-caste’ as sparingly as the discussion permits, and have substituted instead such terms as status group, commensal group, endogamous group, and co-operative group.

The local ritual status of any particular caste group depends upon its relation, not only to those factors in the ritual status of other like groups which derive from their descent or from India-wide pollution beliefs, but also to the variable local beliefs concerning pollution which carry most weight in their locality (Hutton 1946, pp.67, 98). For example, the members of a high status group who eat venison would not thereby lose relative local ritual status (Lacey 1933, p.33) if they lived in juxtaposition with a higher status group of Rajputs who eat the meat of wild boars (Hutton 1946, p.67), or with a group of Brahmans (Ghurye 1932, p.26; Srinivas 1952, p.28) who eat meat. Thus while it would be true to say that orthodox Brahmans occupy the top of the system and the scavenger groups the bottom, it would not be possible to arrange the remainder in any order that would be valid for more than one relatively small area.

This relativity of ritual status leads at once to the query – if there is no fixed hierarchy, how do people know which groups are of high and which of low ritual status, or where the line of untouchability must be drawn? I shall argue that this is done mainly by reference to the beliefs subsumed under the label ‘Pollution Concept’. Some authorities consider the behavioural manifestation of these beliefs to be so complex as to baffle analysis (Ketkar 1909, p.122; Ghurye 1932, p.1; Hutton 1946, p.41), yet they appear to be comparatively few in number and remarkably consistent in their effect upon status evaluation in all spheres and at all structural levels. The existence of a central core of common beliefs about pollution, and their acceptance at the present day even by those low status groups who suffer most from the ritual status system, is amply demonstrated by the uniform nature of the action taken to modify behaviour when such a group is attempting to rise in ritual status, and the narrow range of criteria by which behaviour is modified. Lacey and others have described how such groups decide to give up a few ‘degrading’ occupations and to cease eating beef and domestic pork (Lacey 1933, p.267) and cease drinking alcohol (Srinivas 1952, p.30), and this pattern can be traced in all the Indian census reports produced during the present century. The first steps towards a rise in ritual status, in other words, entail not doing certain things which are well known to all Hindus. If, therefore, we are to understand the ritual status system, we must know what behaviour must be avoided.

The remainder of this survey is concerned, therefore, mainly with what Radcliffe-Brown wrote: 'Hinduism does not believe in caste. I would obliterate it at once. But I believe in varna-dharma, which is the law of life. I believe that some people are born to teach and some to defend and some to engage in trade and agriculture and to do manual labour, so much so that these occupations become hereditary. The law of varna is nothing but the law of conservation of energy. Why should my son not be a scavenger if I am one?’ (Gandhi 1945, p.175). This statement appears to postulate a sort of hereditary trades-unionism freed from the caste restrictions of pollution, endogamy, and commensality. (See also the views of Ghurye 1932, and Radhakrishnan 1947, pp.133-5.)

1 A modern feature of caste is the use of the caste structure for political organization, even the Communists (Dube, personal communication) having employed group loyalties for vote-catching. It would be interesting to trace the connection between the introduction of voting systems (municipal and otherwise) by the British in India, and the emergence of caste sabhas as political organisms, Ghurye (1932, p.184) notes that the creation of sabhas has not lessened jāti differences.

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(1952, pp.134–5) has labelled ‘ritual avoidances’, that is, the rules of behaviour in caste which are ‘associated with a belief that an infraction will result in an undesirable change in the ritual status of the person who fails to keep the rule’. There is, of course, a great range of outward symbols through which both secular and ritual status may be ascertained (Hutton 1946, pp.74–6; Srinivas 1952, p.29) – symbols such as special clothes or ornaments, or houses, or social rights – and these are important enough to the persons concerned to be defended with a vigour amounting even to rioting (Hutton 1946, p.75). But they are not relevant to this essay, which is concerned with the underlying principles of evaluation and not with outward symbols which vary from group to group and which find their proper place in ethnographic studies.

Srinivas (1951, p.423) has drawn attention to the vital fact that, at any rate in respect of contact between human beings, pollution always overcomes purity. Contact with some purifying agent, such as the waters of Ganges, may wash away a man’s sins, but, unless he renounces group life, it will not remove his inborn group-derived pollution and thus improve his group ritual status. If a ritually pure Brahman touches an outcast, it is the Brahman who becomes temporarily polluted; the outcast does not become purified. The social effect of this belief is too obvious to need explanation. Were it reversed so that all men might, at the touch of a Brahman, achieve Brahmanic ritual status themselves, all the distinctions between status groups based on purity and pollution would disappear.¹

Pollution may be divided for convenience into two classes: permanent and temporary. The latter may become, in the absence of purificatory ritual, permanent. As a permanent attribute pollution is an inherent characteristic of the relationship between social groups of various categories: between man and the phenomena of the natural world; and between these phenomena themselves.² It is the degree of permanent purity or pollution, which fixes group ritual status, that orders inter-group behaviour and attitudes (Roy 1934, pp.148–55); that ordains who may marry whom; who may cook for or eat with whom; who may work for whom, or work with whom, or worship with whom (Blunt 1931, pp.2, 7; Ghurye 1932, pp.6–10; Hutton 1946, pp.41 ff., 174; Chattopadhyay 1952, pp.11, 34; Srinivas 1952, p.26).

It is an attribute of various parts of the body – the parts above the navel being of a higher state of ritual purity (with reservations concerning the left hand) than the lower portions

¹There is very little evidence in any of the most authoritative modern works on caste about the principles underlying the use of purifying agents. Ketkar (1909, p.120) records that ‘The purifying agencies were control of mind, austerities, fire, holy food, water, earth, the wind, the sacred rites, the sun, liberality, sacred text, etc., which purify from pollution between status groups based on purity and pollution would disappear.

²Just as trees have castes, so have fevers. . . . Some fevers are scavengers (Mihtars), some farmers, others Gujars or cow-herds, etc.’ (Rose 1919, p.256). In the sense of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, time is also brought within the field of influence of the Pollution Concept (Ketkar 1909, p.122; Rose 1916, pp.239 ff.; Roy 1934, p.153; Srinivas 1953, p.75), and this has given rise to a highly developed science of astrology upon which all Hindus depend for guidance in their life crises. Place, too, is affected by pollution beliefs (Ketkar 1909, p.24), as may be seen by the many restrictive rules concerning entry into temples, shrines, cooking hearths, etc. Colour has degrees of purity and pollution: white, for example, is ritually purer than other colours and is thus worn by Brahmins on ritual occasions. Even bodily movements and numbers are governed by purity and pollution (Roy 1934, pp.152–3).
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(Ketkar 1909, p.119), a fact which governs the nail-paring activities of barbers.\(^1\) It is an attribute of material objects – for example silk has a higher ritual purity than cotton (Dubois 1906, p.81), gold (Dubois 1906, p.342) a higher ritual purity than silver, or brass, or iron, or earthenware (Hutton 1946, p.67; see also Lacey 1933, p.218) – and in this sense it governs, \textit{inter alia}, the ritual status of metal workers (Ketkar 1909, p.20), and the conventions regarding the utensils, ornaments, and apparel appropriate to high and low castes and to ritual and secular occasions (Blunt 1931, p.99; Hutton 1946, pp.74, 178 ff.). It is an attribute of the vegetable world (Chowbe 1899), certain classes of trees such as fig-trees (Hutton 1946, p.203) and banyans (Chowbe 1899, p.227) or plants such as \textit{tulasi} (sweet basil or \textit{Ocimum sanctum}) being of especially high ritual status (Hutton 1946, p.92) and, therefore, suitable – in the case of trees – as cult centres or – in the case of plants – for use on sacred occasions. It is an attribute of the animal and reptilian world – the cow,\(^2\) the cobra, and certain monkeys, for example, have a high ritual status, while at the other end of the scale the domestic fowl and domestic pig occupy the lowest status (Dubois 1906, pp.185, 617; Ketkar 1909, pp.20–1; Rose 1919, p.140; Blunt 1931, p.94; Elwin 1939, p.197; Fuller 1944, p.75; Hutton 1946, p.199; Ratnam 1946, p.53; Srinivas 1952, p.27), with scaled and unscaled fishes coming in between (Blunt 1931, p.95) – and in this sense it gives diet its powerful influence on group ritual status. It is an attribute of all forms of human emissions – whether it be breath, spittle, nasal mucus, semen, menses, urine, faeces, sweat, or body grease (Dubois 1906, pp.183, 188, 239; Hutton 174; Srinivas 1951, p.178; 1952, p.103), including even the glance or shadow of some low castes (Ketkar 1909, pp.6–23; Hutton 1946, pp.63–72) – and thus delimits the ritual status of scavenging, washing, barbering, and certain other endogamous groups concerned with personal service (Dubois 1906, p.179; Stevenson 1930, p.6; Ghurye 1932, p.12; Hutton 1946, pp.86, 180). Finally it is an attribute of death and decay – all who come in contact with death are deeply polluted\(^3\) – and in this sense it fixes as untouchable the ritual status of knackers, and of the ‘undertaking’ groups, this rule applying even to the Brahmins (known ironically as Mahabrahmans or ‘great Brahmins’) who officiate at mortuary rites (Ibbetson 1916, pp.6–7; Hutton 1946, p.69).

\textit{Temporary} ritual purity and pollution, on the other hand, is \textit{situational}, and in general relates to the personal ritual status of individuals within the context of endogamous and commensal groups. It governs what seclusion must be observed and what sacred ritual is to be performed when a person eats food, or when there is a birth, or sickness, or death in a house; what steps have to be taken to purify those who have offended against ritual avoidance rules or who have unwittingly come in contact with some source of permanent or even ephemeral impurity. The distinction between the operation of what are herein called permanent and temporary purity and pollution can best be illustrated by what happens when a person of high status touches an ‘untouchable’. As has been noted, the man of high status at once becomes temporarily untouchable to his status group, until he is purified by appropriate ritual. But whereas he can be rendered ritually pure, the untouchable cannot;

\(^1\)The way in which the differentiated ritual status of the upper and lower halves of the body interacts with the group-derived ritual status of the whole person has received no attention, though the example of barber behaviour quoted shows that it has observable social effects.

\(^2\)The Hindu attitude towards the sanctity of the cow has changed completely since the Rig-Vedic era, when the Aryan-speaking conquerors superimposed a cattle-sacrificing, beef-eating, and \textit{soma}-drinking culture upon the indigenous cultures of India. At the present time cow-sacrifice is held in abhorrence (though buffalo-sacrifice is countenanced by some high castes) and caste punishments in most parts of India include penalties for either the deliberate or accidental killing or injuring of cows (Ghurye 1932, p.25; Furer-Haimendorf 1943, pp.98–9). For modern examples see Dube (1951, p.134) and Srinivas (1952, p.222).

\(^3\)Death in a family creates a temporary state of pollution and loss of personal ritual status among relatives, but this is set right by appropriate ritual. It is constant occupational contact with death and decay that causes permanent devaluation of group ritual status.
the untouchability of the one is transient; of the other irrevocable in his lifetime so long as he remains integrated with his natal groups.1

The one type of untouchability is relative within the endogamous and commensal groups as well as within the caste system, since it affects the relations of the individual with others in all the groups with which he comes into social contact. The other type defines the relative positions, within the caste system as a whole, of the endogamous and commensal groups themselves. It should be noted that, later in this essay, I shall show that endogamous groups do, in fact, change their relative degree of pollution, and hence also their relative ritual status. Such changes, however, if in an upward direction, entail some generations of reformed behaviour, and it seems undesirable to use them, therefore, to confuse the concept of 'permanence' here applied to group-to-group pollution. This concept of permanence has heuristic value in clarifying the ways in which pollution reacts upon the individual, for there is a great deal of practical difference, to an ordinary Hindu, between pollution which can be expunged in his lifetime, and pollution which takes many generations to modify. On the other hand, changes of group status in a downward direction can occur rapidly, either through the taking up of a barred occupation or a prohibited diet (Ketkar 1909, pp.20-1). But in this instance, too, there is a clear distinction between the temporary loss of personal ritual status by an individual, and the permanent loss of group ritual status by a group. The polluted individual can be purified by group ritual and readmitted. The polluted group might need centuries to re-establish its former group ritual status vis-à-vis other like groups. Both permanent and temporary and situational pollution can be divided into two classes, voluntary and involuntary. The first includes that which results from an act of commission or omission relating to ritual avoidance, and the second that which results from the forces of nature. Among the last would be grouped (together with the inborn group-derived pollution of all individuals) the temporary pollution arising from birth, death, sickness in the family, and, in the case of women, menstruation. In the absence of adequate research into the effects of these two sub-divisions, and particularly into the sanctions which apply to them, it is not possible at the moment to comment on the analytical usefulness of this distinction.

Finally, in addition to permanent and temporary pollution, and voluntary and involuntary pollution, there is a very important distinction to be made between external and internal pollution, but before this can be done we must analyse in greater detail the beliefs comprising the Pollution Concept, the structural levels at which they are effective, and the way in which they are manifested in behaviour.

First come the beliefs underlying the ritual avoidances of food and water. Hutton (1946, p.62) goes further than most other authorities in regarding these, in their social manifestation in group commensality, as the keystones of the caste system; but all authorities, from Ibbetson (1883, p.185) to Ketkar (1909, p.24), Senart (1930, p.38), and Ghurye (1932, p.7), are agreed on their great importance in the evaluation of group ritual status. There has been, however, a good deal of confusion of thought about the way in which these beliefs affect social behaviour. This is due in part to the popular use of the label 'commensality' — and particularly its modern variant 'inter-dining' — in association with endogamy, a practice which has given rise to a mistaken belief that all food avoidances are coterminous with the endogamous group (Blunt 1931, p.89), and that this is therefore the only significant sphere of restriction. Yet the literature of caste abounds with evidence that this is not the case. Most endogamous and commensal groups will eat food cooked and served by a person of a higher status group

1Senart (1930, pp.79-80) suggests that in some areas it is still possible for the individual to secure, by bribery or other means, acceptance into a higher caste. In the absence of further evidence these must be regarded as exceptions which prove the general rule. Acceptance into a lower status group is less difficult, but even this involves an initiation rite (Fuchs 1951, p.87).
(Ketkar 1909, p.24; Ghurye 1932, pp.7, 9), a reason to which Blunt ascribed the popularity of Brahman cooks throughout India. Some endogamous groups combine with other like groups in one large commensal group (Dube 1952, p.20), i.e., many 'castes' treat the whole 'caste' as a commensal group though their 'sub-castes' will not intermarry (Hutton 1946, p.163). Some 'tribal' caste groups, for example, the Chaukhutia Bhunjias, will not take food from their own daughters once they are married, even to men of their own 'sub-caste', i.e., within the endogamous group (Dube 1950, p.75); others (Dalton, cited by Hutton 1946, p.163 n.3) will not allow even their wives to cook for them. Many endogamous groups include the guru, or spiritual guide, among the 'cooking' group, and for this purpose he 'ranks as a relative' (Blunt 1931, p.89). Thus it is clear that a person may eat at the hands of persons (for example, Brahman cooks) whose daughters he would not be permitted to marry, and may be forbidden to eat at the hands of members (for example, married daughters) of his own endogamous group. In other words, the ritual avoidances of diet rest on some foundation other than endogamy and are not always coterminous with the endogamous group.

Hutton (1946, p.63) has stated that members of exogamous groups which intermarry can also share food, but the reason he gives – that 'a man must be able to eat food cooked by his own household' – does not prove his case. Commensality between exogamous groups may be forbidden, not because they differ in ritual status, since that might prevent intermarriage, but because they come under the protection of different lineage spirits (Dube 1950, p.75). For example, in castes observing patrilineal descent and patrilocal marriage, the marriage of a woman sometimes transfers her from the care of the deities of her natal household to those of her marital household (Rose 1945, p.982). Such a woman, provided that she is of equal ritual status to her husband, might therefore become eligible to cook for him, (and cease to be eligible to cook in her natal home), from the moment she became his wife, a fact which would explain the restriction among the Chaukhutia Bhunjias noted above. Tribal sources (Dube 1950, p.75; Majumdar 1950, p.236) also provide ample evidence of similar restrictions based upon allegiance to, or protection by lineage spirits, and it may well be that this is the activating belief that makes some very low castes, such as the Holeyas and Paraiyans, object to contact with the priestly Brahmans (Hutton 1946, pp.162–3).

There is yet a third level – that of the individual – at which food avoidances are manifested. An individual may achieve, through ritual preparations for a sacramental rite or, conversely, a breach of caste rules, a temporary and situational rise or fall in personal ritual status which separates him from his group and may, in extreme cases (Hutton 1946, p.163n.) separate him, while taking a meal, even from his wife. All Hindus regard the cooking and eating of a meal as a kind of rite (Ketkar 1911, p.90 n.2), which, in the case of some high Brahman castes, may involve complicated preparations including bathing and changing clothes (Hutton 1946, p.64). The level of temporary ritual status thus achieved is high enough, in some castes, to render polluting even the touch of a man's own uninitiated child.

Clearly, food avoidances operate in different ways at different levels of the social structure. The fact that most endogamous groups will eat food cooked by higher status groups emphasizes the unity of the caste system as a whole, while defining status graduations within it. The coalescing of endogamous groups into commensal units indicates that there are fine distinctions of pollution danger between commensality and connubium. The avoidances

1Acceptance of the principle of eating at the hands of superiors and rejecting food at the hands of inferiors is a criterion of assimilation into the caste system of tribal groups who, in their 'natural' state, often refuse to eat with non-tribesmen, whether of high or low status.

2Except, as will be seen later, when the meal is taken away from home.

3The relation between the equality of ritual status that justifies intermarriage and that which justifies commensality is very obscure. From the fact that commensal groups are generally coterminous with or larger than endogamous groups, we may assume that the pollution danger of intermarriage is greater than that of commensality (see also Rose 1945, p.979). But we do not know the nature or the degree of this difference. Further research into the relationships between groups practising hypergamous marriage would throw valuable light on this problem.
concerning married daughters show that the protection of lineage or household deities may also play a part in this field of avoidances. The restrictions on cooking by wives shows that, in some groups, individuals may achieve, through ritual preparations before a meal, a personal ritual status higher than that of their own marital family. A person may be said, therefore, to be enclosed within several concentric circles of food avoidances. The outermost circle comprises the avoidances affecting interrelations between endogamous groups, commensal groups, and, more rarely, larger groups of varying character called 'castes'; these avoidances being correlated generally with the group ritual status of the groups concerned, but sometimes, as in the case of Jains, with sectarian restrictions. The middle circle of avoidances are those affecting relations between exogamous lineages and within joint or individual families, these being correlated with lineage deities and ritual. The innermost circle of avoidances is that affecting personal ritual status, the individual and situational state of personal purity or pollution of an individual vis-à-vis all who surround him, including his own family.

The diet avoidances associated with inter-endogamic-group and inter-commensal-group relations are ordered, at the level of observable behaviour, according to three principles, the first of which applies also to the drinking of water and the smoking of hookahs or 'hubble-bubble' pipes. This first principle is that cooking and carrying vessels, as also hookahs, are carriers or 'conductors' (a concept first introduced by Francis Day) of pollution. The second principle is that some comestibles are intrinsically pure, and others intrinsically impure. The third principle is that certain methods of preparation and cooking of food can affect its 'pollutability' and therefore the degree of pollution transmissible, and so modify the associated ritual avoidances.

A few hypothetical cases will suffice to illustrate the operation of the first principle. X and Y are two Hindus, the former a Brahman and the latter a middle-class trader; X may eat as the guest of Y if the food is cooked and served by a person of suitably high ritual status, for example a Brahman cook, even though X would not eat food cooked and served by Y himself (Blunt 1931, p.89). On the other hand, X may drink water given by Y, even though he may not drink from Y's glass, provided that the water is poured through the air into X's glass (Blunt 1931, p.98), since the act of so pouring it purifies it (Hutton 1946, p.62). But X may not smoke through the same mouthpiece the hookah of any but a man of equal status, since to do so he must touch the mouthpiece (Ibbetson 1916, p.25; Blunt 1931, p.98; Hutton 1946, p.167), and he would therefore be barred from sharing Y's hookah unless he provided his own mouthpiece (Senart 1951, p.47), or used his hands as a funnel (Rose 1945, p.979). X might eat food given even by a Sudra provided that he accepts it in the raw, dry state, washes it, and cooks it himself (Dubois 1906, p.184; Stevenson 1920, p.246; Blunt 1931, p.94; Hutton 1946, p.160). To these hypothetical pointers may be added the fact that every man must possess a few personal utensils of his own: a lota or drinking vessel, a batua or cooking pot, and a thali or dish. Better class people also possess a katora (saucer), gilas (glass), kalchal (spoon), and gagra (water-pot). In addition to these, lineage-segments, endogamous groups, and larger commensal groups (presumably those who sanction inter-endogamous-group commensality) keep special large vessels for use at their caste feasts (Blunt 1931, p.99).

Through all these types of behaviour there runs the common assumption that utensils carry pollution, and therefore a person must possess his own, and shun those of persons of lower status. In discussing this, Hutton (1946, p.162) has compared Hindu beliefs concerning contact pollution with the Polynesian concept of mana, a comparison also made by Roy (1934). He sees the transference of this type of pollution from one to another as something analogous to the transference of mana, which may be likened to the passage of a psychic charge from one person to another. A close study of the evidence, however, suggests, at least in respect of food avoidances of some kinds, the possibility of a more mundane, and perhaps more...
plausible, interpretation. For example, the refusal to use the utensils of lower status groups may be due to fear of actual contact with traces of bodily emissions – such as saliva, sweat, or body grease – which to the Hindu are the most dangerous sources of pollution (Rose 1945, p.979; Srinivas 1952, pp.103-4). There is also the possible correlation between porosity and pollutability, which would account for the fact that the most porous utensils, for example, those made of earthenware, are held to be more likely to carry pollution than those made of brass, because they cannot be kept as clean (Ibbetson 1916, p.25; Elwin 1939, p.196; Hutton 1946, p.67). Again, the fact that fruit bought from a low-status vendor can be washed clean – in the pollution sense – with water, whereas utensils cannot, suggests that the degree of handling is an important factor. The daily handling received by personal utensils would be far more likely to impregnate them with bodily emissions than the casual handling of fruit for sale. All these examples suggest a fear of actual contact with physically polluting substances rather than a fear of a mana-like psychic charge (see also Rose 1945, p.979).

The second principle ordering diet avoidances – the intrinsic purity or pollution of certain kinds of food – is the basis of the vegetarian habits of some castes and of the ban on the eating of beef and the flesh of domestic fowls and pigs by all except the lowest castes. All orthodox Hindus hold that life is sacred, and for this reason some caste groups will not eat any kind of meat. The most sacred of all animals is the cow, and none may kill cattle nor flay them, nor eat their flesh without at once incurring severe penalties (Dubois 1906, p.190) which, in the case of a guilty group, might reduce their ritual status to untouchability.1

On the other hand the ban on eating domestic pork and fowls rests on their intrinsic pollution, since they are scavengers which eat offal, faeces, and carrion, all of which are highly polluting. The operative principle which stigmatizes these creatures as polluted is clearly the same as that which applies to the persons who eat them – that is, impure diet – and an interesting point in this connexion is Blunt’s (1931, p.95) statement that no caste which eats meat at all will refuse mutton, goat’s flesh, venison, or game birds. He does not correlate this with the commonly accepted fact that the species named have the reputation (however undeserved!) of being ‘clean feeders’ like the wild boar, whose flesh is eaten by many commensal groups that would not stomach domestic pork (Srinivas 1952, p.33). Further information would have been valuable in determining the precise connexion between beliefs concerning polluted flesh and those concerning human emissions. One might ask, for example, whether the distinction between scaled fish, generally held to be clean feeders, and the non-scyal eels and other fish which are known to be scavengers, is based upon the same considerations as differentiate between the flesh of wild and domestic pigs and fowls.2 A last point I wish to make here concerns alcohol, against which the Government of India is taking a strong stand. Alcohol is polluting, but the underlying reason is obscure. In the absence of adequate information, one might conclude that the polluting character of alcohol rests not upon intrinsic impurity, but upon the clear connexion between its consumption and the loss of inhibitions and mental control, since mental control is one of the paths to spiritual release, and any threat to it is a spiritual as well as a social threat.

The third principle affecting diet avoidances – that methods of handling and cooking affect the degree of pollution transmissible – touches very closely upon the problems of the

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1Dube (personal communication) has pointed out that cattle sacrifice by tribal groups such as the Gonds does not always result in their being classified as untouchable. However, all the evidence concerning fully assimilated groups indicates that those who kill cattle or deal in their hides are usually classified as untouchable, and we know that even hill-tribes not fully assimilated sometimes discriminate between those who do and those who do not eat beef (Fürer-Haimendorf 1945, p.241).

2There is a wide gap here in our knowledge of beliefs about pollution. Rose (1919, p.256) has indicated that status among, for example, trees, and fevers, is evaluated, at least nominally, on the same bases as human status, that is, they are given such status titles as ‘scavenger’. We may ask: Does a rational assessment of status in terms of avoidance of physical contact with polluting substances such as human emissions underlie all, or many, or few, or any of the avoidances of the ‘intrinsically’ polluted phenomena noted?
modern urban dweller who has to eat meals at restaurants, and the traveller who has to sustain himself at wayside stalls on journeys by road, rail, and river. Here the most important distinctions are those made over a large part of India (Ketkar 1911, p.90; Blunt 1931, p.89; Ghurye 1932, pp.8–9; Hutton 1946, pp.64–5), between (i) raw food, such as fruit, (ii) food cooked in water (kachcha food), and (iii) food cooked in ghee (clarified butter) or parched (like popcorn) over a fire, which is called pakka food. Of these three classes of food, that cooked in water is the most easily polluted and, therefore, subject to the most severe restrictions (Ketkar 1911, p.90; Hutton 1946, p.64). It has already been noted that raw food may be accepted by a high caste man from a low caste vendor, and eaten after washing, and this has released for consumption by travellers and persons living away from home a wide range of fruit, grain, and vegetables. It does not, however, solve all their problems, for grain and most vegetables must be cooked, and this is not easy when travelling or living in crowded tenements. This may be why pakka food is so valuable, for the city shops and restaurants and the wayside and railway stalls display a rich assortment of fries, fritters, roast nuts, biscuits, and sweetmeats which can be bought and eaten by almost all the countless thousands of pilgrims, doss-house- and hostel-dwellers, and industrial workers, who have to feed away from home (Ketkar 1911, p.90).1 It has even been found possible, through the elastic realism characteristic of Hindu thought, to find reasons for including aerated waters—a boon to thirsty millions—in the pakka diet, on the grounds that the passage of gas through the water in the process of manufacture removes pollution. Ketkar (1911, pp.90 n.1, 94–5) gives important clues to the mechanism of ‘sanctifying’ new foods; or old foods in new circumstances. According to him the food concerned may be ‘conceded the privileges’ of the more pure food it replaces; or, to take the example of piped water, payment of water tax may be regarded as sufficient ‘atonement’ to remove pollution; or, as in the case of medicine, a scriptural text may be sought which will legitimize the deviation. In all these cases the action taken is consistent with the beliefs of the Pollution Concept. The deviation is made to fit into, and not conflict with, what Malinowski would have called the ‘charter’ of ritual status evaluation.2

This brings me once more to what is, perhaps, the most important distinction concerning ritual avoidances, that is, the distinction between external and internal pollution. The late Sarat Chandra Roy (1934, pp.85–6) once criticized Ketkar for overstressing outward or ceremonial purity. Roy held that purity rests ‘on differences in the psychic types, the varying degrees of dominance of the soul over the sense, the dominance of the real man or God in man over the animal in man’. It is not clear whether, by ‘psychic types’, Roy was referring to individuals of particular psychic categories, or groups with a particular psychological orientation. If it was the former, then what he was discussing was the purity associated with what I have arbitrarily labelled psychological behaviour—the behaviour which affects personal ritual status, the relationship between the individual and his karma rather than the social person and his dharma. Dominance of the soul over the senses of the kind shown by ascetics and sannyasis withdraws the individual from the behaviour pattern of his natal group, and raises him above it in personal ritual status, and so we may say that this kind of purity

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1Dube (1953) believes that this distinction between restrictions observed in regard to kachcha and pakka food respectively is no longer generally applicable to the conditions of city life and travel. In his view there are now two standards of behaviour, one for the home and one for ‘away-from-home’, observed by rural people. We are left with the question of what rules are observed by those whose homes are in the cities. Have city dwellers now jettisoned all rules concerning diet or do they also, like their rural neighbours, observe a dual set of restrictions, with one type of behaviour in the home and another out of it? The arguments by which these deviations from the traditional pattern are justified or, if not justified, the ritual by which the pollution they cause is expunged, would yield valuable clues to the general beliefs about pollution and the trends of modern thought.

2In this connexion we should be on our guard against concluding that, because there are widespread deviations from the traditional pattern of food avoidances when a person is away from home, the ideal pattern is no longer significant. Status may be judged not in terms of actual deviations common to most groups but in terms of ideals observed in principle by each group.
is achieved through individual rather than social means. If, on the other hand, Roy referred to groups with differing psychological orientations, then he missed the clear connection between social behaviour patterns – particularly those concerning diet – and dominance of the soul over the senses. When regard is had to the spiritual compulsion behind them, it is clear that the end aim of all Hindu ritual avoidances is purity of mind and conscience. But internal purity does not consist only of mental and spiritual purity. The chain of cause and effect from behaviour to purity includes also the inner purity of body which promotes purity of mind (Radhakrishnan 1947, p.133), and it is this inner purity of body which appears to loom largest in the daily thoughts of the Hindu man-in-the-street.¹

Internal physical pollution appears to be regarded as of a different order to, and much more dangerous than, external touch pollution. The evidence supporting this argument is:

(i) Great stress is laid upon the danger of pollution through food and drink, both of which are internally absorbed.

(ii) A diet distinction is made between ‘clean-feeding’ creatures such as wild pigs and game birds, and those, such as domestic pigs and fowls, which are internally polluted through the eating of refuse and faeces.

(iii) A distinction is made between two methods of smoking a hookah (Rose 1945, p.979; Hutton 1946, p.67), in one of which only the hands touch the hookah, whereas in the other the pipe-stem must be placed in the mouth, thereby making possible pollution of an internal character.

(iv) Ordinary water, the most potent carrier of pollution, has opposite effects when applied externally and internally. It is used to carry away pollution from the body, or from the surface of fruit washed in it. But if it penetrates beneath the surface the effect is quite different. It carries pollution into milk diluted with it (Senart 1951, p.184), it increases the pollutability of grain soaked in it (Senart 1951, pp.44, 194) and food cooked in it (Ketkar 1911, p.60 n.1; Hutton 1946, pp.64–5).

(v) On the other hand food which is cooked in the sacred ghi, or which has been parched by fire, is made proportionately less pollutable by the internal penetration of the purificatory agents.

(vi) Similarly, the water of walls may be rendered pure by the internal penetration of cows’ urine or Ganges water poured into it for that purpose.

(vii) There is the correlation between the porosity and the pollutability of utensils made of different materials. Pores enable dirt to enter materials of a porous character, thereby facilitating pollution of a kind that cannot be remedied by external washing.

(viii) There is the fact that trans-status sexual congress affects males and females in different ways. A man may keep as a lover or a concubine a lower status woman, from whose hands he would not take either food or water (Ketkar 1911, p.62), without requiring further purification than a bath after contact. A high status woman conducting a liaison with a lower status man, however, would be expelled from her status group.² The descendants of a hypergamous marriage between a high status man and a lower status woman (anuloma, with the hair) can be raised to their male ancestor’s status by generations of similar selective breeding. The descendants of a marriage between a high status woman and a lower status man (pratiloma, against the hair) become outcasts,³ which probably accounts for the fact that pratiloma marriages rarely occur (Srinivas 1952, p.30). This distinction of progeny by the sex of the lower status partner might be explained in two ways: firstly it may be held that what counts in breeding is the status of the seed, that in anuloma marriage being high and that in pratiloma marriage low. But a more consistent explanation is that, since in sexual intercourse it is the man who emits the polluting secretion and the woman who receives it internally, the man is exposed only to external pollution, which can be removed by a bath, whereas the woman is internally polluted to a greater degree than if she had eaten emission-polluted food such as domestic pork.

(ix) Even among the lowest status groups pre-marital sexual intercourse, while not barring a girl from marriage, results in her union’s being celebrated not by a sacrament but by the civil form of marriage reserved for widows (Khanapurkar 1951, p.76).

¹The relation between diet and thought is regarded as important in many religions other than Hinduism, and it is interesting, in this connexion, that Brotz (1953, p.332), discussing new Jewish cults among the American coloured folk, quotes ‘Rabbi’ Matthews as saying: ‘Also, the reason we don’t have evil thoughts is because we eat clean food.’

²In this connexion Rose (1945, p.964) notes the ‘... popular view that adultery within the caste is much more venial than infidelity outside it, and also the fact that even Brahmasis draw the line at sex contact with some low status groups.

³Loss of status by one member of a group may affect, if not remedied, the group ritual status of a whole endogamous or commensal group. This would account for the severe penalties on pratiloma unions.
(x) Finally, there is the greater stress laid upon the indelibility of internal pollution. Bathing cleanses external pollution, but internal physical pollution through food requires internal treatment with, for example, a dose of the sacred *panchgaya*, the five products of the cow. Generations of reformed behaviour may be necessary to remove the taint of internal physical pollution from any group (Srinivas 1952, p.30), and it is significant that even converts to Islam or Christianity sometimes cling to this belief (Hutton 1946, p.178) and form endogamous and commensal groups based on behaviour patterns. It is only in terms of these ideas about internal pollution that we can explain why the caste system, though permitting group mobility in ritual status over a span of several generations, denies to the individual that free mobility of personal status within his own life span which, in Western eyes, is the essence of social freedom.¹

Hutton (1946, p.65), arguing on the basis of 'test' classifications of caste diet avoidances made by Blunt (1931, pp.90 ff.), has stated that there is no relation between the severity of diet avoidances and the social position of the 'caste'.² However, the abundant evidence that, over most of India, eating beef or domestic pork and other unclean creatures, are important criteria in evaluating caste status (Roy 1912, p.380; Ibbetson 1916, pp.267, 274; Furer-Haimendorf 1943, pp.308–9; 1945, pp.96, 244, 252; Srinivas 1952, pp.27, 33) and in placing groups above or below the line of untouchability, shows clearly that this generalization is invalid.³ The error lies in the source material. Blunt based his test on five different ranges of avoidance connected with *kachcha* and *pakka* food, distinguishing between:

(a) Those who will eat *kachcha* food cooked only by a member of their own endogamous group or by their personal guru (spiritual guide), and *pakka* food cooked only by the same or by a Halwai or Kahar.

(b) Those who will eat similar food similarly cooked by the above castes and also by Brahmans.

(c) Those who will eat similar food similarly cooked by all the above castes and by lower castes of rank which they regard as at least equal to their own.

(d) Those who will eat food cooked by almost anyone.

He then tried to show that by classifying seventy-six different castes of the United Provinces under these heads it was possible to prove that the restrictions observed by some low caste groups exceeded those observed by some sections of high castes, and that there was no consistency in variations of attitude towards *kachcha* and *pakka* food respectively.

At first sight Blunt's case seems unanswerable; but it fails on two counts. Firstly he gives no information on the vital question of the juxtaposition in interaction of the caste groups noted, and this alone is enough to vitiate his whole argument. Pollution beliefs vary regionally in a quantitative as well as qualitative sense, and the inconsistencies in caste attitude found by Blunt might well turn out to be quite consistent when related to regional variations over the whole area of the United Provinces. That is to say, if the caste groups had been classified first in relation to their local contiguity and interaction, and then reclassified under Blunt's five heads, it might well be found that where high status groups are lax in their restrictions low status groups follow their example, and vice versa. In such a situation it would be quite possible for some low status groups in a region of rigid avoidance rules to exhibit restrictions exceeding in severity those of higher status groups in regions of lax avoidance rules (for examples see Radhakrishnan 1947, p.134).

Secondly (and this is, perhaps, a more important omission), Blunt also fails to take into

¹The mobility of personal ritual status which can be achieved by a Hindu through asceticism or renunciation cannot be compared with the free status mobility of the West. The one type of mobility necessitates deviation from and renunciation of the group pattern of life, the other may occur within the context of group life.

²Roy (1934, pp.146–7) quotes Desai concerning evidence that low castes in Gujarat observe stricter taboos than higher castes, but the criticisms I have levelled against Blunt's evidence apply, mutatis mutandis, to Desai's evidence also.

³Majumdar (1950, pp.71–3) has described how class fission among the Hos is caused, in part, by abstention, on the part of the high class, from eating beef and pork, and consequent cessation of inter-class commensality.
STATUS EVALUATION IN THE HINDU CASTE SYSTEM

account the different structural levels at which diet avoidance occurs. It is conceivable that diet avoidance at the exogamic and endogamic levels arising from special features of common descent or common ritual might exaggerate, in any given endogamous or commensal group or even religious sect, the general level of pollution beliefs common to any particular region, an example being the vegetarian diet imposed on local groups by the tenets of Jainism. Accepting this hypothesis, the inconsistencies in caste attitude which Blunt and Hutton regarded as evidence against a correlation between status and attitude might be explicable in terms of an underlying correlation between status and attitude overlaid by irregularities traceable to other ascertainable principles. A final criticism is that the attitudes discovered by Blunt’s test are subjective, and, therefore, not necessarily valid evidence of objective status. Ketkar, whose approach is among the most stimulating, provides a typical example of the uneven quality of the evidence available. He first evaluates objective status on the basis of what might be called the potential of the intrinsic pollution of various ‘castes’, distinguishing deepening degrees of pollution between ‘castes’ who pollute (i) water, (ii) an earthen vessel, (iii) a brass vessel, (iv) a temple courtyard, and (v) any place they live in – the last category being untouchables required to live outside the confines of towns and villages (Ketkar 1909, p.24). But his account of what constitutes this pollution is very sketchy (Ketkar 1909, pp.118–9), and he hurries on to describe two other ways of estimating objective status which throw a tantalizingly inadequate light on status variations based on sex and role. He distinguishes, in an ascending order of status, between ‘castes’ who (a) may give water to or touch a Brahman male, (b) those who may do these things to a Brahman woman, and (c) those who may do these things to a Brahman widow (Ketkar 1909, p.25). As Srinivas (1952, p.157) and others (Rose 1945, p.983; Sarma 1951, p.70) have pointed out, however, married Hindu women have a much higher personal ritual status than Hindu widows, who are regarded as ‘inauspicious’ sufferers for the misdeeds of previous existences. Thus, paradoxically, those who may touch the Brahman of lowest ritual status – that is, the Brahman widow – are considered to be of higher ritual status than those who may touch only a Brahman man or married woman. Ketkar (1909, p.25) explains this paradox by correlating the ritual status of the ‘touching’ person with the severity of the ritual avoidances observed by the ‘touched’, i.e. by the ‘hardness’ of the ceremonial rules of purity of the people they can touch without polluting them. His argument appears to mean that the more severe the ritual avoidances observed, the more vulnerable to pollution the person is. Put in another way, it might be said that severe ritual avoidances are outward symbols of a person’s inner vulnerability to pollution, hence only castes of a very high ritual status may touch such persons without polluting them. This principle of distinction is consistent with the distinctions in avoidance between kachcha and pakka food. Kachcha food is more vulnerable to pollution than pakka food, and therefore only persons of the highest ritual status can handle kachcha food without polluting it, whereas in some areas even roadside vendors can handle pakka food without endangering it. Ketkar (1909, p.26) finally notes: (a) that the barber ‘castes’ divide other ‘castes’, in an ascending order of status, into those (i) whom they will only shave, (ii) those whose finger-nails they will pare, and (iii) those whose toe-nails they will pare; and (b) that the washerman ‘castes’ also make distinctions in the various services they will perform for ‘castes’ of different status. But he makes no attempt to isolate the principles of pollution involved, one of which – that which creates a distinction based on finger-nails and toe-nails – can be related to the belief that the upper part of the body above the navel is of a higher degree of ritual purity, and therefore less polluting to touch, than the lower parts. Ghurye (1932, pp.34–7) records division of status by occupation.

1Sectarian divisions alone do not always result in restrictions on intermarriage or inter-dining. In Shamerpet, Dube (1952) notes that the Vaishnavite and Shaivite sections of the Gaondolas intermarry and inter-dine. The important point is whether sectarian differences are associated with behaviour differences of a polluting character. The worship of different deities will not in itself result in differences of status.
giving examples to show that this principle serves to divide not only ‘caste’ from ‘caste’, but also ‘sub-castes’ of the same ‘caste’ who, though following one general occupation such as leather-work, distinguish between those who make saddles, those who make leather oil-bottles, and so on. But he gives no indication whether these distinctions are purely economic ‘lines of demarcation’, or whether they include some arising from other principles and involving ritual as well as secular status.

A significant neglect of underlying principles appears also in Blunt’s analysis of the most marked objective manifestation of ritual status – the line which is called, in some parts of India, the *jal-chal* line (Hutton 1945, p.185). This was a status boundary of pollution from beyond which no person of high status might accept water in any circumstances. Even the device of pouring water through air, which has been noted as sufficient to remove the caste pollution of the low ‘clean’ castes, will not avail against the pollution of an untouchable, for it is of such a degree that nothing will expunge it. Blunt (1931, p.100) isolated four classes of such untouchables, the nature of which throw a clear light on the interaction of pollution beliefs of different orders. These classes were:

(i) Those castes that have an unclean occupation, e.g. the scavengers, the dealers in dead cattle, the washers of dirty and especially menstuous clothes.

(ii) Those that keep pigs, or eat pork and beef.

(iii) Wandering tribes if they have no settled home to which to return.

(iv) One caste, *for unknown reasons* (my italics).

On the basis of the active pollution belief, these groups may be reclassified into:

(a) Those whose low ritual status is due to contact with death or decay, that is, the first two categories of Blunt’s class (i).

(b) Those whose low ritual status is due to contact with the abhorred human emissions, that is, the first and last categories of Blunt’s class (i) – accounting, incidentally, for the emphasis on the washing of menstuous clothes – and also the first two categories of his class (ii), the keepers and eaters of pigs.

(c) Those whose low ritual status is due to desecration of the cow, that is, the dealers in dead cattle of Blunt’s class (i) and the beef-eaters of class (ii).

(d) Those excluded for reasons about which more information is necessary before a classification by active principle can be made at all.

There is evidence that each overlapping principle increases the degree of pollution, so that scavengers who eat beef are more polluted than those who do not (Senart 1930, p.49), and this may well account for the fact that even the lowest status groups contrive to make fine and often puzzling distinctions of ritual status between each other (Hutton 1946, p.70; Reddi 1950, p.1). For example, a commensal group which eats beef but not domestic pork might regard as untouchable a commensal group which eats domestic pork but not beef, and the latter might regard the former as untouchable because they eat beef. The rules of both, though quite different, provide equally valid reasons for regarding non-conformers as beyond, in a particular sense, the pollution pale. Blunt, however, was not concerned with principles. He notes, for example, that one ‘caste’ was regarded as untouchable because it used bird-lime to snare birds, and was content to associate its loss of ritual status with the

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1Chattopadhyay (1952, p.11) notes that in Bengal there are some ‘castes’ which, though not untouchable, are below the *jal-chal* line. It would have been interesting to know where the distinction between external touch pollution and internal pollution fitted into this picture.

2Washermen, though of low status, are not always regarded as untouchable, in spite of the fact that those who wash menstuous clothes are so regarded. The distinction may rest upon the fact that the most abhorred emissions – menses, semen, urine and faeces – are excreted from orifices below the navel, whereas sweat and body grease emerge from the skin all over the body. Ordinary washing of upper garments such as shirts, turbans, etc. would not involve contact with the four most polluting emissions, and therefore washermen handling only such garments might escape the stigma of untouchability.

3For many examples of restrictions operating in an ‘untouchable’ group, see Fuchs (1950, ch.1).
cruelty of this practice (Blunt 1931, p.101). But it may well stem from the mere taking of life for a living; for instance, destruction of the life-principle in oil-seed is the reason why the oil-crushing branch of the Teli ‘caste’ is untouchable, whereas the oil-dealing branch is not (Hutton 1946, pp.77–8). In parenthesis it may be noted that there is no inconsistency here with the high ritual status of the Kshatriya or so-called warrior-ruler stratum of caste groups, since in their capacity as warriors these groups are regarded as taking life, not consistently and for gain,1 but spasmodically and to protect their people (Ketkar 1911, p.88 n.). Incidentally, there has also been much confusion of thought about ‘untouchability’, a good example of which can be seen in Blunt’s attempt to clarify the definition of the term ‘depressed’ as applied to caste groups. He wrote: ‘Others regard “depressed” and “untouchable” as synonymous terms; but untouchability can scarcely be used as a criterion now, when the idea itself is fast disappearing; whilst it was never a satisfactory criterion at any time, for a caste may be regarded as untouchable by some of the twice-born, and not by others; a caste may be untouchable in one district and not in the next; and there are untouchable castes with touchable sections’ (Blunt 1931, pp.334–5). It is clear that Blunt did not see the concept of untouchability as something inherently relative and dependent upon the fortuitous juxtaposition of status groups in any given locality; something of which it can be said that relativity is its most important sociological characteristic, without which group status mobility would not be possible; something which can only be studied by reference to a scale of values pertaining to pollution and ritual as well as to birth. It has been shown above that ‘untouchability’ is not a concept confined only to the lowest status groups, or only to caste-to-caste relationships: it permeates consistently the entire Hindu ritual status system and individual as well as group behaviour. Even a Brahman can become temporarily untouchable if he comes in contact with something or someone sufficiently polluting. The point at which an endogamous or commensal group sinks down to the level of permanent untouchability can be studied only in terms of a concatenation of values manifested at different levels: not in terms of the position of that group considered as an ‘in’-group vis-à-vis all other like groups everywhere; but in terms of its relation to contiguous or interacting groups which themselves stand in variable relation to one another.

The nature of group untouchability can perhaps be illustrated most clearly by taking a hypothetical example. Consider the case of a ‘depressed’ caste group wishing to raise its ritual status. Let us suppose that the group members are (i) employed in scavenging and cleaning latrines, (ii) that they eat beef and domestic pork, (iii) that they drink alcohol, and (iv) that they are poor and landless. Such a caste group would be regarded as untouchable by almost all other groups because of items (i) and (ii), though fine distinctions of behaviour might enable it to establish precedence over some other of the lowest status groups. No ‘clean’ caste group would accept water or food from it; no orthodox Brahman would take a part in its ritual; it might be subjected to a wide variety of restrictions on its movements, such as a ban on temple-entry, on education within the school walls, or living within the village confines. Were it not for the fact that the caste system is fissile, and that ‘untouchability’ is relative and susceptible of modification (Rose 1945, p.979; Srinivas 1952, p.30) through a change in behaviour, such a caste group, as a whole, would remain in its lowly station for ever. But all Hindus know that this is not the case (Hutton 1946, p.98; Srinivas 1952, p.30). A progressive section of such an untouchable caste group might decide on action to raise its ritual status (Srinivas 1952, p.35). It might first give up alcohol, which is often at the root of economic degradation, and thus begin to accumulate a little money, perhaps enough to acquire some land. If the group as a whole will not follow them, the progressive

1 Evidence concerning the status of butchers in meat-eating high status groups, and of those who perform ritual animal sacrifices, would throw valuable light on this point.
section may decide to give up the ‘untouchable’ habits of scavenging, cleaning latrines, and eating beef and pork, and take instead to agriculture. This section would then become endogamous and break away from its lowly brethren, like the Chamars of the United Provinces (Turner 1933, p.517) or the Chuhras mentioned by Senart (1930, p.82). It will later call itself by a new and possibly higher-sounding name (Hutton 1946, pp.98–9),1 and in time, after several generations of effort, establish itself at an entirely new level of ritual purity above the line of untouchability. Not only will it then regard its own parent group as untouchable, but it will apply this term to other groups, originally of higher status, which it has overtaken in its march towards ritual purity. Blunt (1931, pp.55 ff., 216) records many examples of such rises in status2 – see also Risley (1891, p.528); Ibbetson (1916, p.267); Senart (1930, pp.81–2); Hutton (1946, pp.98–9); and Srivastara (1949, pp.38–9) – but he has failed to correlate them with the two basic caste characteristics of fission and the relativity of ritual status. He saw the possibility of raising ritual status through the mechanism of caste fission, but he obscured the method by ascribing caste immobility to a refusal on the part of Brahman priests to minister to the ritual needs of low castes. The truth is that such immobility rests upon the refusal of the lower status groups to accept the restrictions and austerities deriving from the Pollution Concept, and not upon any fiat of the Brahman priesthood – see, for example, Fuchs (1950, p.56). Incidentally, the reverse process, a fall in ritual status due to eating fowl flesh and drinking intoxicants, is well illustrated by the Kurmi, of which ‘caste’ the Kurum ‘sub-caste’ holds itself to be of the highest ritual status because it has retained the traditional restrictions whereas the other ‘sub-castes’ have relaxed them (Risley 1891, pp.530, 533).

The fact that ritual status in the caste system is evaluated mainly on behaviour patterns appears to be the principle reason why caste-like stratification has taken root in both Islam and Christianity (Crooke 1907, p.125; Ibbetson 1916, pp.13–14; Blunt 1931, p.57; Ghurye 1932, p.164; Hutton 1946, p.106). Conversion to either of these two religions does not necessarily alter the objective ritual status of converted groups, since this depends not only upon belief but also upon behaviour. Thus converts of one group often deny commensality and connubium to converts of other groups whose behaviour offends them (Hutton 1946, p.106), an example being the Islamic Ghosi and Kingariya, who refrain from eating beef and limit their ‘inter-dining’ to those who observe this rule (Blunt 1931, p.202). Again, the most important step in the assimilation of tribal groups into the Hindu status system, as opposed to the Hindu religious system, is the formation of classes based upon such behaviour traits as vegetarianism or at least abstention from beef, pork, and alcohol. Such classes tend to become commensal and endogamous groups, which, breaking away from the tribe, become ‘caste’ groups fully assimilated into the Hindu status system. This evidence underlines what is, perhaps, the most important function of ritual status evaluation through behaviour, namely, that it enables all the multifarious groups of India, no matter what their race, colour, creed, class, or occupation, to be linked together within one consistent all-India frame of reference.

1The habit of renaming occupational groups and roles of low status is now firmly established in the West, where rat-catchers are now ‘rodent operatives’, undertakers ‘morticians’ and so on.

2Dube (1953) has questioned the abundant evidence on this matter contained in the Census of India Reports. He says that while minor changes in status – as he put it, changes within one varna level – are not unknown, an upward change from untouchability to touchability has yet to be proved. He cites the case of the Satnams as an example of an unsuccessful attempt to effect such a rise in status by a change in behaviour, but the example does not quite fit the argument here advanced, since it concerns an attempt to secure a status rise within the lifetime of the persons concerned. Earlier informants have stated emphatically – as has Srinivas (1952, p.90) – that such rises in status can be secured only after generations of reformed behaviour. Dube’s criticism makes it clear, however, that if the evidence of the Census Reports – upon which all writers on the caste system have leaned heavily in the past – is suspect, the sooner its validity is tested the better. Here, again, comparative students are at the mercy of research workers, upon whom the responsibility rests to provide accurate evidence. It is worth noting that Srinivas’s (1952, p.25) evidence concerning status claims is inconclusive, as also is that of Ketkar (1909, pp.20–1).
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CONCLUSIONS

The following tentative hypotheses emerge from this survey of Hindu status evaluation:

(I) There are two categories of status – secular status and ritual status – each derived from different sources and socially manifested in different ways.

(2) Whereas secular status is derived from such criteria as skill, education, wealth, land ownership and economic ‘lines of demarcation’ in occupation, ritual status is derived from behaviour patterns linked with mystical beliefs, of which the most important are those subsumed under the title ‘The Hindu Pollution Concept’.

(3) The principal constituent beliefs of the Pollution Concept are: (i) that group behaviour patterns establish group-derived natal ritual status; (ii) that this group ritual status cannot be altered so long as the person concerned conforms to the group pattern of behaviour; (iii) that there is another category of ritual status – personal ritual status – which is derived from personal rather than group conduct, and which provides the individual with the means of achieving higher natal ritual status in subsequent rebirths; (iv) that a rise or fall in personal ritual status above or below the level of group ritual status involves deviation from the group pattern of behaviour.

(4) The main principles governing evaluation of natal status through group behaviour are: (i) that the life principle is sacred, and that destruction of life for a living (as in oil-seed-crushing) is polluting; (ii) that death and decay are polluting and therefore occupational association with them is polluting; (iii) that all human emissions are polluting, and therefore occupational association with these, too, is polluting; (iv) that the cow is sacred above all creatures, and that killing it, or flaying it, or dealing in skins or eating its flesh is sinful, and therefore polluting; (v) that certain other creatures – some monkeys, cobras, squirrels, etc. – are also sacred in varying degrees or in some localities, and that killing or eating them is polluting; and (vi) that the drinking of alcohol is polluting.

(5) Pollution may be permanent or temporary, being subdivisible into voluntary pollution, the result of wrong behaviour, and involuntary pollution, the result of such natural crises as birth, death, and menstruation. Pollution may also be subdivided into external and internal pollution, the latter being much the less easily expunged.

(6) Permanent pollution is a function of the relations between commensal and endogamous groups; between man and the phenomena of the natural world, and among these phenomena themselves.

(7) Temporary pollution is situational, and in general is a function of the relations between an individual and the commensal, endogamous, and local groups of which he or she is a member.

(8) Group ritual status is socially manifested mainly through ritual avoidances which may arise from: (i) social activation of a single group (or category, e.g. sannyasis) by one or more beliefs; or, (ii) social activation of a number of groups – from the family through its associated endogamous and commensal groups to the caste system as a whole – by one or more beliefs.

(9) There is no fixed hierarchy of ‘castes’ and ‘sub-castes’. Group status – both secular and ritual – is variable and relative in time, space and interaction. Relativity and fission are the characteristics which make possible the status mobility of endogamous groups. Observance of different combinations of status principles makes possible fine differentiations of status at all levels.

(10) Change of group ritual status by endogamous groups may be both upward and downward, upward change being secured only by generations of conformation to behaviour patterns which avoid pollution, and by severing marital and commensal relations with any non-conforming section.
Ritual status is of different orders at different structural levels. (i) At the level of endogamous and commensal groups, group ritual status vis-à-vis like groups can be changed, and is evaluated on the basis of (a) the observance of certain standards of behaviour, mainly concerning occupation, diet, and marriage, by reference to the Pollution Concept; (b) the right to perform certain rites, of which the most important is the orthodox initiation rite of upanayana, which divides the duija, or 'twice-born' groups, from the lower orders. (ii) At the level of exogamous groups, group ritual status vis-à-vis like groups cannot be changed, and is evaluated according to (a) the ritual status of the endogamous group to which the exogamous group belongs; (b) mythical origin; (c) difference in protecting deities. (iii) At the level of the individual, group-derived ritual status vis-à-vis the whole Hindu system is inherited and cannot be changed except by deviation from the group behaviour pattern of the endogamous group to which the individual belongs. It is evaluated (a) within the caste system, according to the status of the endogamous and commensal groups to which the individual belongs; (b) within the endogamous group, according to the exogamous group to which the individual belongs; (c) within the local community, according to ritual roles undertaken by his status group in local group ritual. On the other hand, personal ritual status, achieved through such deviations from the group pattern of behaviour as asceticism or breach of pollution rules, is variable upwards and downwards. A permanent rise or fall in personal ritual status involves severance of social ties with the natal group.

The emphasis on behaviour patterns rather than ritual as the main criterion of status evaluation paves the way for an all-India frame of status-reference capable of linking together all tribes, sects, creeds, classes, races, and commensal and endogamous groups into a consistent status system.

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